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Frontier Stories

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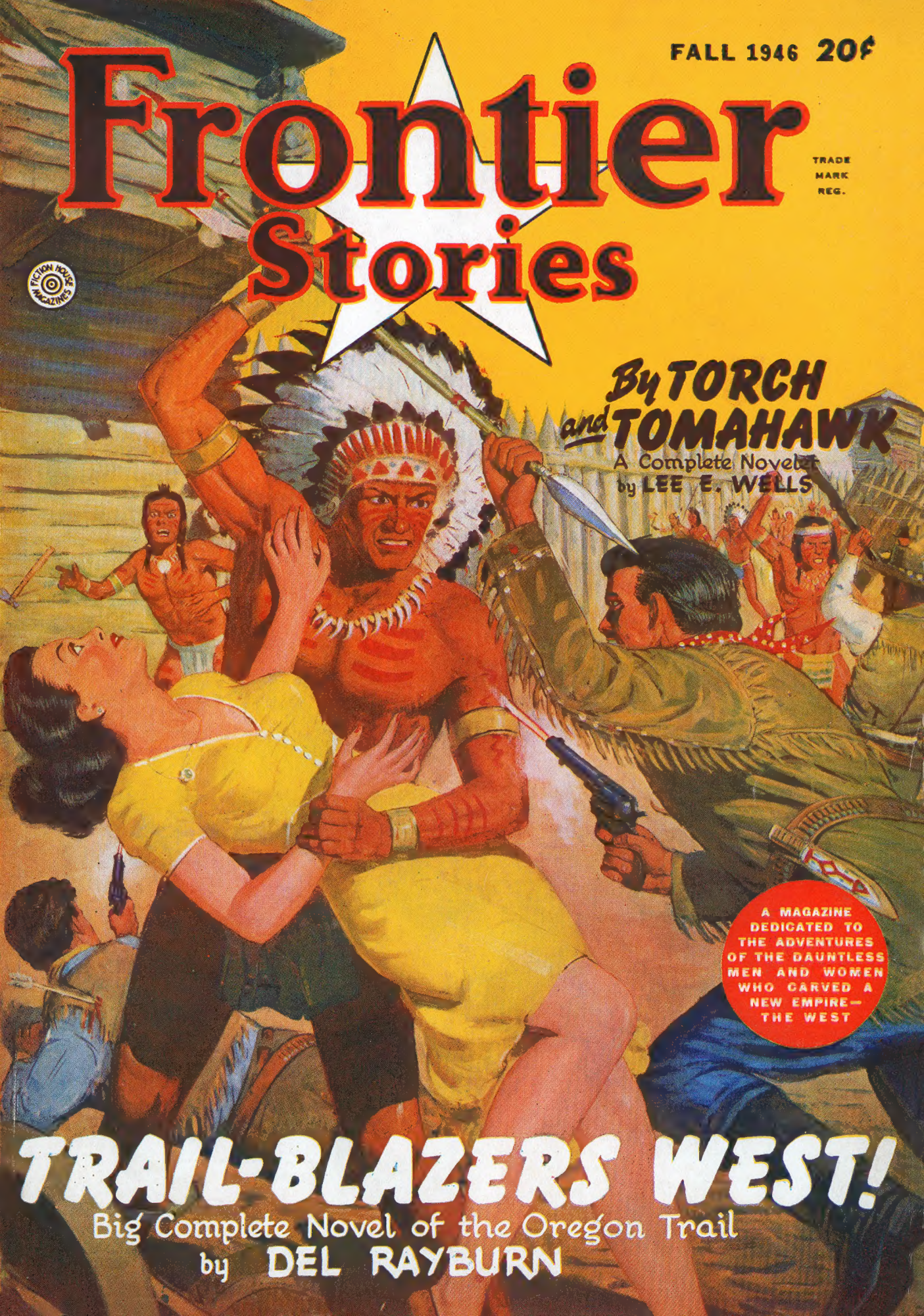

By TORCH and TOMAHAWK

A Complete Novelet by LEE E. WELLS

A MAGAZINE DEDICATED TO THE ADVENTURES OF THE DAUNTLESS MEN AND WOMEN WHO CARVED A NEW EMPIRE—THE WEST

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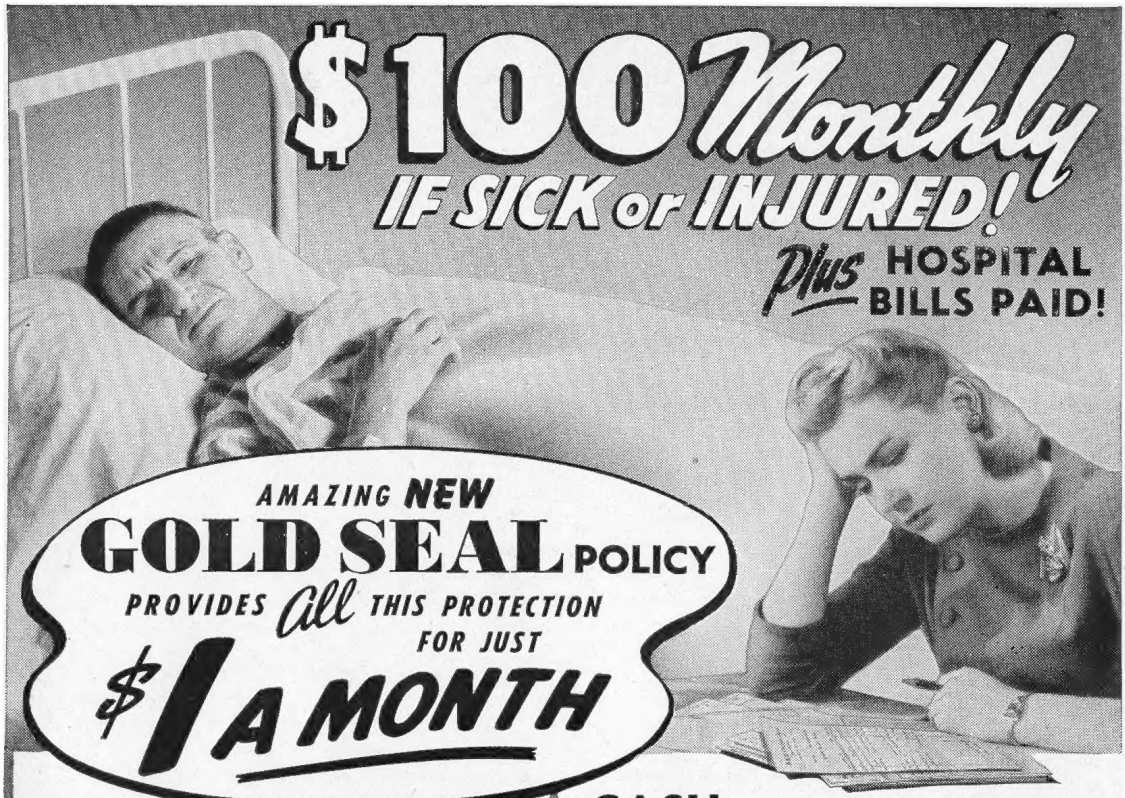
Big Complete Novel of the Oregon Trail by DEL RAYBURN



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Frontier Stories

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TRAIL-BLAZERS WEST!

They figgered Wild Jack MacDaniels'd come back all right . . . even that Civil War couldn't kill 'im—and so they turned the little settlement into a death-trap for the man-eatin' wagon boss. . . . What they didn't reckon on was what Wild Jack had learned on the battlefields!

NIGHT AND desolation shrouded the empty wagon yards, the mule corrals and the big barns that flanked the landward side of River Street here. The big warehouses and loading dock that stretched back from the street on the other side, backing up to the wild Missouri's edge and the steamer landing, were just lifeless. And this was the headquarters layout of the hell-rolling MacDaniels' Fast Freight Company. No words

By DEL RAYBURN

A Roaring Novel of Freighter Wagons

Even at that distance, Wild Jack could see the shafts that bristled from the fallen man's back.

were necessary to tell Wild Jack MacDaniels that Fort Benton had changed.

But where was Haw? The bachelor quarters on the second floor of the office building was locked up as tight as the rest of the place. It seemed just as deserted. And Haw was all that really counted.

Wild Jack knew a moment of bitter self-condemnation. The kid brother had been only fourteen, for all his man-size, the last time he'd seen him over four years ago. Wild Jack hadn't been thinking of that at the time, when he'd headed down-river to join the Union Army. The kid had been as able a mule-skinner as the best of them. And Wild Jack had caught the first boat down the river after word of the hostilities came, leaving the outfit in Haw's charge. In such an emergency personal responsibilities had seemed too insignificant by comparison for any consideration—to Wild Jack MacDaniels. Long since he had realized that few others had felt their country's call so keenly. But not until right now had he considered the possibility that someone might have taken advantage of his absence to cause young Haw difficulties.

So it was now that he experienced self-condemnation. For there was only one answer to this change he found: tall trouble. And where was Haw?

Wild Jack mounted the roan mule he'd left at the hitchrail before the office. A mirthless grin twisted his lips beneath the heavy growth of sandy beard grown to hide facial scars picked up during the years just past. Evidently he'd overestimated the regard his fellow townsmen would accord his record, having risen during those years from a buck private to the commission of a full colonel. Well, at least there was one consolation—if it was to be trouble, there was little chance he would find himself up against anyone whose knowledge of meeting or making trouble equalled what he had acquired during his absence.

Another strange thing caught his attention now. The saloons and dancehalls on either side here as he rode up River Street, though lighted and open for business, seemed as deserted as his own yards and corrals just behind. All except the Riverman's Bar, just ahead. And when the hell-raising brawlers of River Street congregated in just one saloon—that added up to only one answer, too.

HE REINED toward it, kicking the mule into its ambling mulish lope. His bleak grin had become wolfish. At least he wouldn't be expected. To dodge a hero's welcome which he felt he could not receive in the place of the dead (the only ones to his mind who deserved it) he had signed the steamer's passenger log at Council Bluffs as C. E. Wade. A locked trunk of uniforms and his other freight had come along under the same name. Then at the last woodcamp the steamer had touched that morning the roan mule he now rode had taken his eye. So he had not even arrived with the boat or in daylight.

He quit the mule at the hitchrail and a moment later stepped into the packed barroom. A purple screen of swirling smoke curtained the dim lights of the place. A fitting setting for the brewing of hell's business, Wild Jack decided, even before he caught the words of a bullthroated speaker, roaring:

"—and I say hanging's too good for him!"

"Who's he talking about?" MacDaniels asked, turning to a man he had crowded in next to, while the tirade poured on.

"Some mule-skinner they say plugged the boss of the local bullwhacking outfit in his bed last night," the fellow replied, his head swinging around. Wild Jack recognized him as a fellow passenger from the steamer. "I hope they hang the devil. I'll help 'em!"

Fool! Wild Jack thought. So eager for violence over a petty local shooting, yet so casually unconcerned about death stalking hundreds, thousands, on battlefields not long ago. With a swing of his broad shoulders he plowed forward, elbowing his way toward the bar where he could get a look at the speaker. If it was a skinner they were cooking up a quick end for, he'd break up the party even if the fellow was guilty. And, loose and nondescript as was the rough garb he had affected, it could not disguise the uncompromising poise and military bearing his lithe and spring-steel strength had acquired.

Reaching the bar he hopped upon it, planted his feet and let out a parade-ground roar that drowned every other sound in the place.

"Bartender! Set out a drink. The hot-air popping off around here's got me famished."

At the far end of the bar the barkeep jumped from his stool as if prodded by a hot iron, Wild Jack's roar lifting him before he had conscious thought of his action. He stared, bug-eyed.

"Lively, man!" MacDaniels urged. Not until then did he take notice of the crowd. The gaze he turned on them was contemptuous, speculative, as if they were a collection of curiosities.

Then he looked to the man who had been addressing them from the elevation of a table in the barroom's center. Recognition flashed through him. Luke Caldwell, headman of the bullwhackers since old Grizzly O'Brennen's retirement to his rich ranch south of the river. Luke Caldwell, General Manager of the nearest thing there had been to competition for Wild Jack's muleskinning outfit, O'Brennen's Rocky Mountain Freight Company. But there had never been any friction between the two outfits in those days. Why was Caldwell here after the life of a skinner?

"See here, stranger," Caldwell purred, "we've done our drinking around here for the time being. And if you've any ideas of breaking up our necktie party you'd best forget them and clear out. You've got the look of a mule-skinner, and that breed ain't popular around these parts tonight. We're going to string up their gutless young boss, Haw MacDaniels, so—"

"Bartender!" Wild Jack stomped his hobnailed boots upon the polished bar with a resounding blow. "Set out my drink and be quick about it!" His eyes shot back to Caldwell, cutting him off with his mouth open.

"Keep your yap shut, Windy! The hot-air you spout might even curdle good whiskey. Talk about gutless! If anything's gutless, it's a thing like you—afraid of a square fight in the open but ready to lay your dirty tongue on a man and try to kill him with hot-air."

All eyes had been upon the intruder's face; now they dropped to his hip to see if he was armed to back up his talk. Thus did they become aware of the wear-blackened holster and the polished gun butt in the open above it. And then of the right arm crooked above it—and of the gleaming steel hook that could not dispel the empty look of the sleeve. A start of unbelief jerked through the crowd.

And Caldwell, as if having followed their eyes and recovered more quickly, jumped from the table into an aisle that opened for him as he started toward Wild Jack, a note of triumph in his voice as he snarled, "I wouldn't dirty my hands with you or ask anyone else to! But I'll gunwhip you within an inch—" he reached toward a shoulder holster. And that was Wild Jack's cue.

SHIFTING on his feet so quickly it was hard to realize he had moved, his left hand came around. And cradled in the practiced fingers of that left hand was a mate to the gun holstered below his crippled right. The crook of Caldwell's elbow was lined up perfectly for Wild Jack's blasting lead, as the fellow reached for his hidden gun. And, from the way his confident march was stopped short as he spun around and collapsed, it was plain that MacDaniels' aim was as good as usual.

"You spineless scum that was listening to the spiel of that yellow shyster in earnest, pick him up and clear out of here before I lose my good disposition! The rest of you boys that was just listening like I was only didn't get thirsty quite so quick, step on up and let's do some drinking."

With the exception of four unhappy-looking bullwhackers who carried Caldwell's limp form from the place, the crowd shuffled forward to belly up. Not a one wanted to admit to being Caldwell's friend and take up his fight, much less to having listened in earnest.

The drinks had just begun flowing well when a bull-throated fellow stuck his head through the door just long enough to bellow, "All Rocky Mountain swampers get to the landing. We've got wagons to load. Make it pronto!"

That started the crowd to thinning out, seeking separate ways. The danger of mob action, for tonight, had passed. Wild Jack paid up at the bar and made an inconspicuous exit.

Outside the flare of new light and activity around the O'Brennen warehouses and landing, up the street at the west side of town, immediately attracted Wild Jack's attention. He left the roan mule and turned that way afoot.

He came to the intersection where Trail Street crossed River, pausing as a body of riders passed, headed for the old Blackfoot Ford across the Missouri that lay at the foot of the street. Looking up the block he could see the imposing establishments of respectability standing where Trail intersected Main. The jail, too, was on Main, where he gathered Haw was being held. But for the moment he held to River.

The plan of the Rocky Mountain outlay was much the same as was MacDaniels' across town from it. Wild Jack drifted back into the alleyways between corrals and stood watching the feverish activity across the street at the warehouses and landing. The pens around him were filled with the deep breathing of resting animals mixed with the sound of others feeding. But Rocky Mountain was a bullwhacking outfit, and he had no interest in cattle, so his eyes hardly noticed the stock, moving around in the darkness behind him. He

was about to be on his way when the nuzzling touch of a mule's lips touched his shoulder.

Wild Jack wheeled around wonderingly. A soft bray greeted him as a long head was thrust over the top rail toward him. Peering close he gasped, "Molly!"

What was the near-wheeler of his favorite team doing here?

A moment later he realized she was not alone. In ones and twos and threes fifteen other heads popped over the fence out of the night beyond, each one beginning to bray as the owner caught the scent of its old master. For this was Wild Jack's own favorite team.

And then from other corrals nearby the discordant greeting began to be taken up with increasing enthusiasm. He realized his whole string of mules was here—in the bullwhackers' yards.

Almost too late he caught the sound of hurried footsteps coming to investigate the uproar. Only now, faced with the enthusiasm of his mules' recognition, did he realize that he had been regarded as a total stranger by Caldwell and all the others he had known in the saloon crowd from years past. And he suddenly decided it might be better to let it stay that way for the present. So thinking, he realized it would not be well to be found here. Just in time he slipped away, and was not noticed.

II

THE SUN was not yet up, though Wild Jack was, preparing for breakfast, when a knock sounded at his door. Unlocking and opening it, he found a hollow-cheeked individual whom he had never seen before.

"I'd like to discuss a little matter of business with you," the stranger said. His expressionless eyes and the cut of his clothes marked him as a gambler. He was dressed and groomed with exacting precision. A small, waxed mustache graced the long upper lip below his beak-like crook of a nose.

Wild Jack, motioning him in, was surprised, for it had been late when he came to this boarding house and took his room the night before. He had supposed it unnoticed.

"I wonder if you're open for a job?" the stranger asked.

"If it's mule-skinning," Wild Jack nodded, leaning back against the door closed behind him. "I hear there's a good outfit here."

"You had made no contact with the local outfit before you came here?" the fellow questioned. When he drew a negative headshake he asked, "How come you mixed into the fracas at the Riverman's Bar? I run a game there. I was looking on."

"Seems like you're asking all the questions," Wild Jack stalled, his suspicion of this fellow mounting. "I've never had any trouble getting a job any place. I've sure never had to give my life's history to get one. How do I know I give a hoot in hell whether you get your questions answered to suit you or not?"

A shadow of a smile flitted across the gambler's hard lips. The expression in his black eyes was unchanging, however. "I guess I was hurrying you a little," he conceded. "I like your style, though, calling me on it. If you can give me the right answers to a few questions, I may have a job for you that will make any other skinning mob you've ever had look like small peanuts. I liked the way you handled yourself last night. That mob was just about ready to roll. Then you step in and—phoof! It's all over. But how come?"

"I don't like shysters," Wild Jack replied evenly. "And besides I was thirsty. And I drink when I damned well please."

The gambler's cold eyes held to Wild Jack's gray gaze for a long moment as if trying to break it. But in the end it was he who glanced away, his dark head nodding briefly as he turned to find a seat.

"Yes, I reckon you do," he murmured, as if satisfied with the answer he had gotten. "You're a stranger here, that's plain, or you'd have been impressed as the fellow you winged last night expected you to be. He's Luke Caldwell, general manager of O'Brennen's Rocky Mountain Freight Company. A big shot around here, or so he's come to think. But not a lawyer at all."

"He's still a shyster for my money," Wild Jack declared.

"Well, I don't like him either, so I

won't quibble." The fleeting wisp of a smile touched the gambler's lips again. He drew a roll of bills from his pocket and peeled off two one thousand dollar notes. "This is the kind of money that will be in it for you if you'll hire on with him, though—put yourself in a position to carry out some plans of mine."

Wild Jack shook his head. "I either get the whole story or have nothing to do with any of it. If you can trust me to earn your money, you can trust me with a look at your whole hand. I like to know what kind of a game I'm into. I don't play no other way."

The other man studied him with a searching gaze for another long moment before he spoke. Then it was as if he had reached a decision. "Around here I go by the name of Flush Rankin, just another gambler," he said. "That's the way I want it to stay, so if you ever breathe a word of what I'm going to tell you I'll kill you—sometime when you forget to keep your back covered," he added with a cynical chuckle. "Do you want to hear it?"

"No one'll ever know more than they do now about you because of my say so," Wild Jack declared. "That's a promise."

"I'll gamble then, because I need you," Rankin nodded. "My real business is as sort of an undercover trouble-shooter for Transcontinental & Western Freighters."

Wild Jack's eyebrows bobbed up as he let out a short whistle of surprise. "The big outfit that operates over the Oregon-California Trail!"

"I told you I wasn't asking you into a game for small peanuts."

"But their nearest business is five-six hundred miles south of here, isn't it?"

"That's right," Rankin said. "But the biggest part of the freighting business with real money in it that goes through Benton, here, is headed south. It might just as well be brought north from the Trail as to go south from here."

"So that's it," Wild Jack murmured.

THE Transcontinental & Western agent nodded. "We got a man into this local O'Brennen outfit several years ago, but I'm afraid the fool's gone soft on the daughter of the old boy who owns it. Anyhow I want another man in the outfit to do what I want done if he doesn't."

"I noticed they were in a considerable hurry about getting something loaded out when I moseyed by there last night," MacDaniels primed.

"Hydraulic equipment for miners in the Big Hole country," Rankin nodded. "From Fort Hall we're as near that country as it is from here. We can't beat their rates on the haul into there, but we've got better country to haul over from the south. Hauling against another bullwhacking outfit, we can beat their time. We offered to put a healthy forfeit against a deadline, just to get those miners' trade. But they're loyal to these Benton outfits. So we talked them into asking the same kind of a forfeit from O'Brennen. Our agent in his outfit talked him into giving it, though it took a note against all the stock and equipment the outfit's got to meet the figure we'd offered the miners. So if they miss the deadline—" his thin shoulders shrugged at the obvious—"they're out of the picture."

It was a beautiful scheme, Wild Jack conceded. And it appealed to him, getting paid for doing something he intended doing anyhow—ruining the O'Brennen outfit for taking advantage of his absence to push a dirty fight on young Haw and run him out of business.

But removing Haw from the position of jeopardy he was now in as the chief suspect of the attempted murder of old Grizzly O'Brennen was the first and most important problem. And by comparison, getting his own outfit back on its feet and ready to deal vengeance appeared as no problem at all, for he had started with a lot less once before.

"I—" he was on the point of declining or stalling off the proposition, seeing no possible help in the job of clearing Haw by stringing along with Rankin and Transcontinental's plans to finish off O'Brennen. Then a new angle and one last question presented itself to him. "—I don't quite savvy why you're propositioning me, a mule-skinner, when you say this O'Brennen outfit's bullwhackers—" He switched thoughts nimbly and finished his sentence. "Why aren't you worried about the jackass freight outfit I heard was located here, too? You expect me to hire out to herd bulls?"

"O'Brennen's outfit has switched to mules just this last week, that's the reason I'm suffering doubts about our agent. I'd have killed him before now if I was sure, but it just might have been the doings of that O'Brennen girl or maybe even the old man himself. But I keep remembering the trouble he had with them when he started using their company to push the mule-skinning outfit around. The young skinner boss and the girl were sweet on each other then. Our agent seems to be top dog there now. He doesn't know he's being watched, so he just might have decided he can marry an outfit of his own and double-cross us. I'm just not quite sure enough to kill him. But I don't want to take any chances on this deal not finishing off the last of Fort Benton's freighters, leaving us a clear field."

So that was it, Wild Jack mused. It was in reality the powerful Transcontinental, pulling hidden strings from so far away that no one would ever suspect it, that had been behind all of the trouble that had been made for young Haw in his absence. And only because of the change the war years had wrought in him, making him a stranger to former acquaintances, had he stumbled onto this truth.

He had the impulse to identify himself to Rankin here and now, but in the same moment realized it would be a senseless and emotional move. Transcontinental had chosen to fight from under cover and there was no reason why he should not imitate their tactics. Besides, killing this fellow now would gain him nothing. He could prove nothing. But, now that he turned it over in his mind, he saw where the information he had might be used to advantage in solving the problem of Haw's welfare. If that worked out, he would have accomplished far more than he had expected in so short a time. So it might be better all around to remain the impersonal, frontier drifter, typically uninhibited by scruples and with no interests beyond the easiest possible means of personal enrichment, which was plainly what Rankin had taken him to be. For, even with Haw's safety guaranteed, there would still be plenty of questions to be answered.

"Who is your man in the O'Brennen outfit?" Wild Jack asked.

"I don't think that will matter to you," the Transcontinental man replied, eyes narrowing. "All you have to worry about is to see that the outfit has plenty of trouble with its mules—if he doesn't. He doesn't know me from Adam, and if you don't know him there's no chance that he'll ever get wise to me."

"I just thought he might be able to help me get on," Wild Jack turned it off.

"No." Rankin's narrow head shook. "That's your problem. You're going to take my proposition?" he asked, offering the two bills he had flashed earlier.

"Did you really think I might not?" Wild Jack murmured.

"No. Or I wouldn't have told you what I have," Rankin admitted. "If you wouldn't work for me, knowing what you know now, I'd have had to kill you. And I'd have hated that because you look like you might take a lot of killing." He made another impatient gesture with the money when Wild Jack still did not take it.

"Hadn't I better wait about taking that until I see if I can get on?" MacDaniels suggested.

"Let me worry about how you earn it," Rankin returned. "If you can't get on with O'Brennen's outfit I'll have some other plans you can help with."

Shrugging, Wild Jack accepted the two bills and pocketed them.

"Now what name do you go by?" Rankin asked, getting to his feet and starting for the door, his business finished.

"C. E. Wade," MacDaniels said. "Didn't you see it on the landlady's book downstairs?" He drew another of the fleeting smiles, little more than an emphasis of the cynical twist in the gambler's thin lips.

"I think breakfast will be ready," Rankin said, his hand on the doorknob. "I paid the lady to keep some back and told her not to disturb us. I didn't want to be bothered if I found we could do business."

III

DOC TOWNER was a rare combination of public servant and business man. His big Towner Mercantile at the busy intersection of Main and Trail Streets reaped dividends on the goodwill created by the services Doc dispensed from an office at the front corner of the second floor.

As doctor or merchant, the public welfare was his. He had taken a prominent part in the founding of Fort Benton's Citizen Committee, created to promote the settlement's best interests along many lines, the bringing of law and order being only one of its objectives. He had been elected the committee's first chairman, and until the time Wild Jack had left for war had remained its only chairman. It seemed unlikely that any change had been made since. And so it was toward the Towner Mercantile building that Wild Jack reined upon taking his roan mule from the stable after breakfast.

Remembering his part, however, and not knowing what eyes watched him, MacDaniels slowly rode the length of the street, scrutinizing the various signs on one side as he went and on the other side as he returned. So when he reined at the corner of the mercantile, looking up at the small sign, J. D. TOWNER, M. D., pointing up the covered stair to the second floor, Wild Jack hoped he appeared to have merely found something for which he had been looking. For he did not underestimate Flush Rankin's ability to kill, if he once suspected a man's living would be detrimental to the interests he represented. And in such a case Wild Jack knew there would be no pretense of a warning. A man simply would be unaware that his masquerade had failed until the moment Rankin's lead smashed into his back. And so, until he was absolutely ready to bring the fight into the open, he would have to watch every move.

Leaving the mule at the hitchrail, Wild Jack crossed the walk and went up the stairs. Just as he reached the short hall outside Towner's office door, the door opened and a young woman stepped out. She gave MacDaniels a frank, blue-eyed glance; moved past him toward the stair and beyond his sight. He experienced a faint shock of surprise at himself when he realized he had watched her go. It seemed like years since he had given any woman a second look.

He turned into the doctor's waiting room, snorting with mild derision at himself. He had thought himself past such foolishness years ago. Yet something about that girl had made his pulse jump, and he felt a detached amusement at himself. A man decided he knew himself and his every possible interest; then something like this happened and its very absurdity mocked him. Still he found it left him with a strange sense of invigoration and lightened spirits to find life was not as drab and formulated as had been his conviction.

Wondering who she was, and quietly disgusted with himself for it, Wild Jack closed the outer door, setting the tiny bell above it tinkling. As if in answer an inner door beyond sprang open, an alert-eyed old man appearing.

DOC TOWNER appeared to have changed none at all in the years since Wild Jack had last seen him. He was as thick-bodied but solid-looking as ever and by contrast as surprisingly quick and energetic in his every movement. As always, the cloth of his suit had a rich, fresh look as if it had been donned for the first time that very morning. His vandyke still gleamed as whitely and was as precisely groomed and freshly trimmed as always.

Perhaps the light of inner excitement stirred by the girl was still in Wild Jack's gray eyes, for the old doctor's face broke into the pleasant lines of a smile. But it was plain that like the others he failed to see behind the beard and lines of bitter experience an old acquaintance of other days.

"Come right on in, friend. What can I do for you?" he asked pleasantly, motioning Wild Jack to the inner office.

"I came thinking perhaps we could do something for each other," Wild Jack declared quietly when the door had been closed behind. He glanced out the big windows that took most of the wall space on two sides of the corner room. On both Trail and Main there were buildings with second story windows of equal level from which someone might look into this room.

"How is that?" Doc Towner asked wonderingly.

"Pretend like you're putting a dressing on this stub," Wild Jack said, holding out his right arm, then beginning to loosen the harness that bound the socket of the hook to it. "Just in case someone's looking on from any of the windows across the way," he added by way of explanation,

answering the gathering wonder in Towner's eyes.

"You're still chairman of the Citizen Committee, I reckon?" Wild Jack asked as the doctor started about the business of gathering bandage and ointment. The question drew a sharp glance from Towner, plainly puzzled that he was unable to place the face of any man who knew of his municipal activities. He nodded briefly in answer.

"Then tell me," Wild Jack murmured, "what it would mean to you and the rest of Fort Benton if the trade and heavy freight that's been coming through here headed for the mines to the south could be grabbed away, brought in from Fort Hall on the Oregon Trail and Salt Lake —to the south?"

"It wouldn't mean anything good," Doc Towner replied frankly. "Why?"

"That's what Transcontinental & Western Freighters are planning on," MacDaniels announced. Towner's eyes flashed up from the examination he had begun to make of the war-crippled arm.

"Why, Transcontinental has no interests within five hundred miles of here," he declared slowly, plainly disbelieving.

"One of your big freighting outfits here is already out of business, isn't it?" Wild Jack pointed out. "That was worked through a man in the other local outfit, O'Brennen's. And now the second and last Benton outfit is primed for the axe. They've taken a forfeit contract on the delivery of some important machinery and supplies in the Big Hole. And the Big Hole country and its mines, by the way, is just about half way between Transcontinental on the Oregon Trail—and here, isn't it?"

"I guess it is," Towner conceded. "But how do you know all these things about O'Brennen's contract? It's not supposed to be generally known."

"Transcontinental has an undercover trouble-shooter who's been in town some time watching the agent they planted some years ago with O'Brennen, just to be sure he does his job. The idea is to see to it that O'Brennen misses the deadline and has to forfeit, which will clean the outfit of stock and equipment and leave the field open for Transcontinental to walk into from the south. The trouble-shooter is afraid the local agent has gotten fond of some contacts he's made here and may have changed his mind about whom he wants to work for. He approached me this morning with the proposition that I see to it the O'Brennen outfit had tall troubles that would cause the forfeit—if the local agent didn't."

Doc Towner set about dressing the arm after he received this information, digesting it as he worked in silence. Finally, with his eyes still on his work, he decided aloud, "So you've come to see if I think the Citizen Committee will raise the ante, is that it? How much did he offer?"

"He advanced me two thousand."

Towner let out a low whistle, his white had wagging soberly. "If that's an advance I guess they really are playing the game for keeps. There *is* big money involved, of course. But—" his eyes came up with another direct gaze probing MacDaniels' face again—"you didn't strike me as the sort of man who would take such money. Maybe the best of us can be mistaken."

THAT BROUGHT a low chuckle from Wild Jack. "I didn't take the money with the intention of earning it because I figured I had sort of had a clear title to it anyhow—as damages. And so you were mistaken, sure enough. But not like you thought. It wasn't to see if you could raise the ante that I came. I just thought that passing that information on to you might be, from your standpoint, a really worthwhile consideration."

"Worthwhile isn't even an apt indication of the importance of that information," Towner declared frankly. "A man doesn't usually hand such a present to strangers free gratis."

"I have my price all right," Wild Jack acknowledged. "But not in money. Just a consideration in return."

"And what is that?" the doctor nodded knowingly.

"Your promise, as a man and as chairman of the Citizen Committee, that Haw MacDaniels' safety in your jail will be guaranteed and that no action will be taken against him until I have time to see this business with Transcontinental to an end."

Doc Towner's bushy eyebrows lifted at

this, new interest coming to life in his eyes. After a moment of deliberation he nodded.

"I'll give that promise, gladly," he agreed. "And so far as our agreement's concerned I've no right to ask, but I'd like to know what young Haw is to you?"

"Well, if you weren't a doctor I wouldn't tell you," Wild Jack chuckled. "I don't want it known until some things are straightened out around here, because I've made faster progress this way, with no one knowing. I'm young Haw's brother."

"Brother!" Doc Towner exclaimed. "Why, I didn't know there was anyone else besides young Haw and Wild Jack in the fa— Wild Jack!" His voice fell to a sharp whisper of unbelief. Incredulousness washed through his features. His white head wagged slowly with doubt.

"Not the Wild Jack I knew," he murmured. "He'd have torn this town apart —likely just made things worse, if he'd come home to find things like they are. I've been worried about what would happen. Anyhow—" he eyed MacDaniels sharply—"the old Wild Jack couldn't ever have held himself in and worked around under cover like you seem to be doing."

"This Wild Jack of yours was a Colonel, wasn't he?" MacDaniels suggested. "War makes powerful changes in a man."

"That's right," Towner agreed. "We expected him to come home in uniform and all loaded down with braid and decorations. But—I never thought that maybe he'd learned the tactics of strategy. It's hard to believe. I expected he'd—you'd be the same hell-for-leather sort as always.

"Why, doggone it all! We had a big reception celebration all plannned until Haw's trouble came up. Then we were sort of afraid to go ahead with plans for fear you'd throw our welcome back in our faces if you got here to find Haw still in jail. We didn't know what to do."

"Just what happened, anyhow—about Haw?" Wild Jack asked.

"He lost out on the deadline he'd taken on a big haul to Fort Owen over in the Bitter Root, a contract he'd been forced into by Luke Caldwell trying to get it for O'Brennen by offering a forfeit," Doc Towner explained. "Losing all your equipment and stock hurt the boy, of course. But when word came that Major Owen had sold it to O'Brennen's Rocky Mountain outfit for less than ten cents on the dollar, the boy went crazy mad and wild. First time I ever saw him drunk, and he was roaring, making all sorts of threats —cleaned up on a whole saloon-full of Rocky Mountain bullwhackers.

"Some time that night an attempt was made on old Grizzly's life out at his ranch —still doubtful if he'll live. And Haw was found on the south bank of the river sleeping his drunk off. What he was doing over there I don't know. Until this morning I couldn't think of anyone else with reason for doing the shooting. But now I don't know. Kate O'Brennen was here just before you came. She told me she and old Grizzly had decided to buy that stuff from Owen and turn it back to Haw. They were going to discharge Caldwell. They hadn't believed the things they'd heard about the fight he was carrying to Haw until then. But after the shooting—well, you can understand how Kate would feel. She decided to use the mules on the haul to the Big Hole. She was just here asking me to help her get some skinners. Your men are all in town yet, standing by to see how Haw comes out. But money can't tempt them to hire to Rocky Mountain, of course."

WILD JACK MUSED. "The only way to clear Haw is to find the skunk who did the shooting, isn't it? I reckon the closer I am to him the more chance I have of catching him. Especially when he doesn't know I'm interested. You give me a note to the O'Brennen girl. I'll hire on as wagon master and round up the skinners she's needing. Transcontinental's spy wanted me to hire on with them. Maybe I can string him along a while longer."

"You get that freight into the Big Hole and ready to unload at Bannack on time, keep Transcontinental blocked out, and I'll guarantee that whatever happens, Haw will get all the breaks. We owe you that much for this hand you've lost," Doc Towner declared. "But personally I don't believe Haw made the try on Grizzly. And, if you save the mine trade for Fort Benton, I'll see you get all the time you need to prove it."

"I don't think it will take long after

things start rolling," Wild Jack murmured. "Write out a note to the girl introducing a mule-skinning wagon-master by the name of C. E. Wade. I may as well get started."

IV

O'BRENNEN'S WAREHOUSES and landing presented a scene of swarming activity, when Wild Jack reined the roan mule up before the company office across the street. But he found the office deserted. Mounting again, he rode across the street and confronted one of the checkers keeping track of the cargoes being put aboard various wagons.

"Have you seen the lady they call Miss Kate?" he asked.

"She was around here confabbing with Big Red Kelly, the yard boss, just a minute ago," the fellow answered. "Must be around one of the buildings here if she ain't at the office."

"Thanks," Wild Jack nodded, then reined back to the street again. He rode past three more loading dock areas between warehouses jutting out to the street, all humming with activity like the first. And nowhere in the hustling crowd did he catch sight of the girl or of a man he thought would answer to the name of Big Red. For Kelly was a new man to him. He wondered about that. Being a small outfit like his own, O'Brennen's Rocky Mountain Freight Company had to double up on some jobs and their yard master had always acted as field manager, too. He had been convinced that Luke Caldwell was the man behind Rocky Mountain's dirty work. But he did not believe in overlooking possibilities, and he looked forward to meeting this Big Red Kelly because a comparative newcomer in a position of such influence with Rocky Mountain definitely was a possibility.

There was one more warehouse and loading area beyond, and Wild Jack had nearly reached it when a high, sharp voice reached his ears. It came from somewhere nearby, as if just around the corner of the ramshackle warehouse immediately before him.

"I came over here to talk business to you, Kelly!" the unseen speaker, plainly a girl, exclaimed in a voice heated with disgust and irritation. "And I'm telling you for the last time to keep your sticky paws off of me."

"Aw now, Katie girl," a big bull voice protested in smirking tones, "since when is any Irish colleen too good to give just one—"

Wild Jack chose that moment to ride around the corner. This last loading yard was deserted except for the two people at the end of the near dock. He was almost upon them the moment he came into sight. He found a burly giant of a red-thatched Irishman, a simpering expression on his homely face as he leaned forward toward the girl whom he had hemmed in against the wall with an arm barring her way on either side.

"Is this fellow bothering you, Miss?" Wild Jack inquired politely from the saddle.

Before she could answer Kelly had wheeled around to glower at the intruder. And knowing his indecision would last only a moment, Wild Jack swung down, wanting to be on the ground ready to meet him.

The Rocky Mountain man was not one to let the slightest advantage get by, and as Wild Jack swung toward the ground he charged in, wanting to close the gap between them before MacDaniels had any time to get set. Wild Jack had only one foot on the ground and his one hand was still on the saddle horn when the fellow left the loading dock in a flying leap toward the ground. He landed not a yard away, his reaching hands almost upon his man as Wild Jack jerked his left foot clear of the stirrup and twisted frantically to one side. He had no chance to get in a blow with his good left hand for Kelly had come at him with his right exposed in dismounting. But he wasted no time trying to get set with his left. Instead, eluding the giant redhead by a hairsbreath, he jerked the crippled right up and brought the iron-reinforced socket of the hook down in a smashing blow behind Kelly's ear before the fellow could recover after missing Wild Jack in his first rush.

This was the first skull-and-knuckles fight Wild Jack had been up against since the loss of his right hand. The slashing blow with his crippled right had been a wholly instinctive move, but it had carried the weight of all the force he could put

behind it in such an off-guard circumstance. And it sent Kelly reeling, as if suddenly drunk, into the flank of Wild Jack's roan saddle mule. That stopped the fight before it was well started. For in the time of a heartbeat the roan had gone into action. The redhead was caught square by the smashing drive of both hind hoofs. And all the outrage and indignation the temperamental roan could muster was behind his act of retaliation.

The giant Kelly described a speedy though sprawling arc and landed out in the dust of River Street as limp as a broken sack. The mule turned to bend a vengeful eye upon the senseless figure, then emitted a hoarse bray of satisfaction.

"I guess you sure set that redhead's sun in a hurry," Wild Jack chuckled, recovering from the surprise of the action. "Sundown—I think that'd be a good name for a roan mule anyhow."

HE TURNED BACK, looking up to the girl still on the loading dock, lifting his hat as he said, "As I was saying, Miss, if that feller's bothering you, me and Sundown'll be more than pleased to make him long regret it."

"If you're as efficient about every job you volunteer for as you were about that, I could sure use some help from you often," the girl declared.

"That's what I'm here about," Wild Jack acknowledged. "I have a note of introduction from the doctor on Main Street. He said you could use a man." He extended the note, but Kate O'Brennen took his hand instead, steadying herself as she hopped to the ground from the elevation of the dock. She was dressed in gracefully tailored saddle pants like a man. And on the ground now, looking up at him, it was eye to eye gaze of a man that she gave him. Remembering the tomboy kid she had been, forever into some devilment with young Haw, Wild Jack knew he would not have failed to recognize her at Doc Towner's office had she been dressed like this.

"I guess I'd better hire you," she declared without a look at the note. "At the rate you've been going since you hit town I won't have any crew left if I put off hiring you much longer. I'm glad about what happened to that red-headed fool, but why'd you shoot the arm off my general manager last night?"

"He tried to tell me how to do my drinking," Wild Jack shrugged. "I've got my own ideas."

"Yes, you've always had your own ideas," Kate O'Brennen nodded, her blue eyes still holding his gray gaze. "I guess a lot of them have been good ones. But if you've an idea that you're fooling me—ha, ha!" She broke off at sight of the consternation that in spite of his will got past the poker-face expressionlessness in his eyes.

"Yes, I know you," she nodded, pressing on. "I should. I've followed every move you've made since you went down the river in '61. You were ready for the field, a buck private, by October of '61. But by the time the Battle of Shiloh Church came off the next spring you were wearing a Master Sergeant's stripes. And you kept right on getting ideas of your own, didn't you?

"You were a First Lieutenant when the Second Battle of Bull Run began. But before it was over you were having to do a Major's job. And so by the time the Battle of Big Black Ridge came along in '64 they'd made you one.

"Yes, I know all about you. You were in the newspapers in the East, you know. And I take some of them. And the ones I don't take, my school friends back there sent me when you were in them. But you wouldn't have any idea why, I don't suppose?"

The consternation that had flooded Wild Jack at the beginning of Kate's recital was under control now. But he knew there was nothing to be gained by trying to stick to his bluff longer as far as she was concerned. She knew him, and the less argument he caused about it, the better chance he had to keep it from being discovered by any others. He nodded with resignation.

"I suppose you'd told them I was your boy friend's older brother," he shrugged with disinterest. "Haw was your boy friend—back in those days, if I remember."

"Boy friend!" she snorted with a pitying look. "Boy friend's big brother. That's the way you'd figure it, all right. I ought to have my head examined—the way I

bawled when you lost that right hand. Mule-headed as ever, weren't you? A Lieutenant Colonel by then and out in front leading a surprise attack on a troop of cavalry. I used every word your skinners and dad's bullwhackers had ever taught me, condemning the saber-slashing Rebel that got your hand to hell's fire. But you didn't waste any time on such foolishness, did you? No—wouldn't even be hospitalized. Stayed in the field. Risked blood poisoning and gangrene. But you were a full Colonel by the time Richmond fell last spring. Isn't it too bad the war didn't last a while longer! You'd have been a General, with your own army."

That jibe angered Wild Jack. It had never been promotions, distinctions or recognition that had prompted the great risks he had taken. It had merely been duty, as he saw it, prompted by the same inconsideration of danger that years before had caused his friends and enemies alike to begin calling him Wild Jack.

"All your pain over my misfortunes and dangers is very touching," he declared in a tone heavy with cutting mockery. "I suppose the fight that's put my freighting outfit in the shape I find it was carried to Haw just so he wouldn't get too prosperous and decide he didn't need me around when I came back. It was nice of you to go to so much trouble to be sure there'd be a place for me. It's sure nice to have someone with your best interests at heart to keep an eye on things when you're away—helling around."

"OH, you mule-headed MacDaniels!" Kate stomped one small, trimly booted foot with disgust. "If Haw wasn't so much like you he'd have come out to the ranch and told us when trouble first started. Dad and I've been trying to build up a ranch. We didn't know what was going on. And we never would have if we'd had to hear it from him. The whole sorry mess could have been headed off before it ever happened, instead of blowing up like it did with Grizzly getting shot."

"And you're laying that against Haw, too." Wild Jack's tone was heavy with condemnation.

"No," Kate O'Brennen's voice fell low as her head shook in denial. Only the blaze of anger in her blue eyes showed the restraints she was having to exercise. "I'm *one* of at least two people in this world who know Haw *didn't* shoot dad. If Haw hadn't been so drunk he'd have known it, too."

Her words electrified Wild Jack with unexpected interest. "You *know* Haw *didn't* shoot Grizzly, did you say?"

"I know it," Kate nodded. "I heard the prowler and got up to see what it was. I yelled at him just before he shot dad. Likely that's why the shot missed killing. I went at him with a candlestick. I had my hands on him. It wasn't Haw. Tobacco was strong on him and there was no liquor. Haw doesn't use tobacco — and he'd just been trying to drown himself in liquor."

"If you know this, then why's Haw over there in jail with a good part of the town thinking he's as good as convicted of murder?"

"It won't be murder unless dad dies. And he ain't apt to die unless something comes along that hits him worse than that bullet did—like us getting cleaned of our freighting outfit in the same kind of a trap that Haw got sucked into. Dad *is* a freighter and, not being as young as he used to be, that might kill him. So I don't propose to let it happen. I'm going to get our freight to Bannack on time even if I have to deal cards from the bottom of the deck to do it."

"What's that got to do with Haw laying in jail when you know he hasn't done anything to deserve it?" Wild Jack wondered pointedly. "Why don't you take it out on Luke Caldwell or whoever got your outfit committed to that contract?"

"What good would it do me to go mixing it with that smooth-tongued Luke, now?" Kate scoffed. "Maybe he does think he acted for the good of our interests. I've got no goods to prove different. And besides, that danged Haw does deserve to lay in jail—and rot! I went over there and told him what I've told you, told him I'd tell the marshal and the Committee and clear his name if he and your mule-skinners would get our freight through to Bannack ahead of the deadline we've signed for. And so what did he do? He told me to go to hell and he'd rot where he was first. Is that any way

to talk to a lady? Now, what do you think?"

"I think he's got better sense than I'd hoped," Wild Jack growled. "Whatever gave you an idea there was a lady mixed up in this deal, anyhow? All I've heard about is a black-headed female mick that'd risk a man's life for a few measly dollars," he declared, his grey eyes flashing icy sparks of cold anger as he remembered the lynch mob that had been on the point of going after Haw's life when he arrived in Benton the night before. "If I hadn't shown up when I did and winged Caldwell to make them forget it, the mob he had rounded up would have had Haw decorating a rope last night. And all because—"

He broke off, sucking in a deep breath of disgust. When he spoke again his voice was as low, as cold and piercing as a March wind.

"If you'd come to either of us, straight out, and told us how things laid, we'd have run your freight through the whole Blackfoot nation on the warpath, if we'd had to, but we'd got it to Bannack on time. But no—you have to play it like a tinhorn building to a hole-card. Yeah!

"I promised Doc I'd hire on with you and get your freight through. I knew Haw didn't down Grizzly and I thought it'd maybe give me a chance to get next to why someone else would want to and nab the real skunk who could clear Haw. But that ain't necessary now.

"I've never gone back on my word, but if Doc won't let me out of it this is one time I'm going to. Your damned freight can rot right here in Benton before I roll it one inch. Maybe you'll learn not to play with a boy's life like you would a dirty poker chip! I'm going over there and tell the marshal what you've told me and get Haw out of there." Wild Jack started to wheel to his waiting mule.

BUT Kate's furious voice stopped him. "Why, you goat-faced, sheep-brained, jugheaded son of a long-eared Highlander idiot! What makes you think the MacDaniels are the only ones with a right to their pride? It's perfectly all right that Haw didn't come to us when the trouble started in the first place. But *I* should throw to the discard all the high cards that come my way and throw myself on the mercy of you generous gentlemen! Yes, indeed!

"Well, you go right ahead over to the jail with your story and see just how far it gets you. It won't get you inside the jail door, much less Haw outside, unless I'm there to back you up. And if the MacDaniels can afford to be mulish about this—then I'll show you just how stubborn a bullwhacker can be, too! When they ask me to back up your story I'll swear your mother whacked you on the head with a wagon spoke the day you were born and you've been feeble-minded ever since, if you weren't before.

"We'll just see how much luck you have getting Haw out of jail the hard way. And if I miss beating the time on that forfeit contract and lose our outfit and the shock kills Grizzly, I'll see your precious Haw hang before I'll talk. Dad means just as much to me as your brother does to you. And you can't prove what I've said without me backing it or a witness. And you haven't got a witness!"

Movement caught by the tail of his eye jerked Wild Jack around. He saw Big Red Kelly beginning to bestir himself from the dust of River Street. And he saw something else, too. A black flash, as some broadcloth-garbed fellow ducked back around the corner of the warehouse.

"Hold on!" MacDaniels roared in a parade-ground bellow, snatching his left gun and sprinting for the corner. Charging around it, he pulled up sharply, almost smashing into Flush Rankin, who leaned against the wall with a quiet air of resignation. Surprise and alarm coursed through Wild Jack. But not for long, as they gave way to a feeling of triumph.

"How long you been here?" he questioned sharply.

"Some time," Rankin admitted with casual indifference. "I, too, have a brother. He happens to be a deaf mute. To teach him, I learned to read lips. With a pair of field glasses I observed a very interesting conversation in a certain doctor's office not long ago. I trailed along here just waiting for the most opportune time to kill you. And I'm glad I did. I never particularly anticipated that chore and I hardly think it will be necessary now, unless you're unreasonable about return-

ing my money. I certainly made a mistake in you, but not one, I think, that could be held for much against me. If you're half of the fabulous character I've heard attributed to you since I hit these parts, anyone will have to admit that I do pick a man when I pick one. I'm just sorry you weren't the man for my job. But the way you double-crossed me is rather disillusioning."

"I didn't double-cross you," Wild Jack replied evenly. "All I promised was not to reveal your identity. Which I haven't. And I won't, if you'll do something for me."

"Who is this?" Kate O'Brennen, still angry-eyed, had arrived.

"This is my witness," Wild Jack declared, his eyes and gun still holding Rankin, to whom his next words were addressed. "Have you heard everything she said?"

"Everything since the red-head tried flying and made a hard landing in the street," Rankin nodded. "In fact, it had gotten so interesting that I forgot myself and edged around the corner there to be certain I didn't miss anything."

"Why, you low-bellied, eaves-dropping thing!" Kate snapped. "If you side this stubborn, mule-skinning—" appropriate adjectives deserted her, leaving her sputtering briefly. "If you back this MacDaniels I'll have you bull-whipped and run out of town!"

THAT brought a dry laugh from Rankin and a derisive snort from Wild Jack. "Not that your threat frightens me greatly," the Transcontinental spy murmured with a quiet chuckle, "but I have no intention of backing MacDaniels. Nor of staying in this stinking little town much longer. And just so your friend won't think he has something to hold over me to bargain with I'll tell you why. I'm an undercover man for Transcontinental. And my work here is done."

"You're leaving me no choice but to back this girl in getting that freight to Bannack on time," Wild Jack declared. "I'm going to have my kid brother out of that jail with a clear name if I have to jack up hell and put props under it."

"That's your choice to make," Rankin shrugged. "It's not to the best interests of my company to leave you, MacDaniels, with nothing more pressing on your mind than to get back into business. The way things are shaping up I'm not worried about even *you* getting that freight to Bannack.

"And now, how about that two thousand of mine that you took with no intention to earn?"

"Didn't you see all I told Doc?" Wild Jack asked sharply. "I'm keeping that as part payment on damages you've caused me. And if you don't side me now you've got my word I'll be around to collect more later."

"Well, you've called the play," Rankin shrugged. "If that's the way you want to play it's jake by me. If you ever roll another load of freight out on the prairie, I promise you'll earn every cent of it—and you'll not be around to collect more. I'll have things all arranged for you."

"Like hell you will," Wild Jack growled. "Unless you want some hot lead in the belly right now you're going with me and keep my kid brother company as a murder suspect. And being a Transcontinental spy, once you're inside that jail it's liable to be some time before anyone remembers to let you out. Even if we can't prove anything else against you."

"Yes, I've thought of that," Rankin nodded. "And I've taken precautions also. The government annuities for the Blackfeet didn't show up on the steamer yesterday, did they? They were left down at Fort Union last year and the trader sold them off as his own goods. The Indians don't like that, going hungry or paying for what is rightfully theirs. There's quite a village of them waiting, camped around the Agency, not two hundred yards west of here. They won't like it, the annuities not showing up again. And I have a few squaw-men in my hire among them. If I turn up missing they'll see that the Injuns make things hot around here. A little booze is all it would take."

"You're bluffing," Wild Jack declared. "And if you're not, we'll take a chance on the trouble you can cause. At least you won't live through it. You're going to jail."

"No!" Kate's hand closed on Wild Jack's right arm suddenly, the touch of her fingers somehow entreating. "No,

Jack. We haven't the right to take that risk. If he's not bluffing, a lot of innocent people, both red and white, would suffer. We haven't the right to drag them into this fight."

"You're mighty worked up about the chance of innocent people suffering," Wild Jack said quietly with pointed implication. "Mighty worked up." But he considered her words only a moment. Then nodded his head grudgingly, breaking the until now wavering menace of his gun upon Rankin, motioning with it for the fellow to get going.

"I'll let your bluff get by without forcing you to face your cards this time," he warned Rankin, "but let me catch you still in town ten minutes from now and I'll have your scalp and to hell with your Injuns."

"Your generosity is only exceeded by your good looks, my friend," Rankin mocked. "Ten minutes is ample time, I assure you. By then I'll be long gone to tend to business I have west of here. I have a lot to do to make certain that if you make a trip to Bannack within the next twelve days you won't find it boring."

V

THE SELF-ASSURED, nonchalantly unhurried retreat Flush Rankin made brought a cold fury within Wild Jack MacDaniels such as had driven him through battles in which lesser men had fallen by the hundreds on all sides. If clearing Haw's name was still his first objective, beating Transcontinental's high-stakes gambling spy had now become a close second. He whipped around as the fellow passed from sight and found Big Red Kelly just taking his first steps from the place of his rude landing. A dazed look was still in the giant red-head's eyes.

"You—" Wild Jack snapped a shot at Kelly's forward toe, clipping the sole-edge just enough to make the fellow feel a tingling shock of the impact as the lead smashed into the ground. Kelly leaped to life and attention instantly, springing above the puff of dust that arose where that foot had been. "How long before that freight can be ready to roll?"

"Why — why, by dawn tomorrow, if the men can last that long," Kelly's words tumbled out in answer.

"You have it ready by midnight, understand! Midnight," Wild Jack directed. "You'll answer to me if you don't. I'm taking over your old job and you're just a common pusher. So get back to work there and push. If you don't get the job done, I'll find someone who can and put you to work as a common hand. Try to quit me before that train's ready to roll and I'll gut-shoot you. Get moving!"

"You're taking over for me then?" Kate O'Brennen asked quietly when the red-head had lumbered out of sight on the trot.

"I've got no choice," MacDaniels declared abruptly and elaborated no further. "You hotfoot it out to see the agent—" he pointed toward the west edge of town just beyond where stood the old adobe-walled fur-trading post that had given the settlement the name of Fort Benton, now falling into disrepair and occupied for the most part by the makeshift government Indian Agency "—and tell him what's up. Maybe he can circulate around and offset any talk Rankin's squawmen will likely start before long."

"Wouldn't a few fat beeves for a feast accomplish that better?" Kate suggested.

"If you want to furnish them and can get them to the reds before dark. Meantime the agent ought to know though. But before you do that, pull half a dozen of your bullwhackers off the wagon loading. See they're armed and well mounted. Tell them to get out to the Mullen Bridge across the Sun River. If Rankin thought to dynamite that it would make us some trouble crossing. I'll send mule-skinners to take their places supervising the wagon loadings. Understand?"

"Yes," Kate nodded. Wild Jack strode off with quick steps to catch his roan mule. Mounting, he reined east along River Street toward the Mule Trough Saloon.

Moments later he reined up at the hitchrail there and stepped down. Inside he found what he had hoped for, Hub Murphy, who had been his train master, and all the other MacDaniels skinners. At the moment they were a disconcerted-looking bunch, idling with vague interests over games of poker and occupied with

some other such half-hearted form of diversion.

"Howdy, boys!" Wild Jack greeted them, halting just inside the door. "Every mule-skinner in the house hit the bar for one last drink on me. Then it's about time we started working again for a living."

If he had anticipated a rush to the bar he was mistaken. They eyed him, sullen and unmoving. From the end of the bar where he had been musing over a drink big Hub Murphy demanded, "Who says it's time we go to work again?"

"I say," Wild Jack returned evenly. "Or have you jayhoos forgotten that Wild Jack MacDaniels has big enough an interest in mule-skinning hereabouts to give some orders?"

"The voice seems about right," Murphy decided. "But all that chin brush—and them clothes. I don't know. Our boss is a big shot in the Union Army. We sorta figured he'd show up in some fancy soldier getup. Maybe if you tell us where we're going to work it'll help."

"We're going to work rolling freight to Bannack for O'Brennen's Rocky Mountain," Wild Jack announced calmly. He saw the surly anger that leaped into every eye.

"If you think that's funny, mister, you're pressing your luck," Murphy growled. "You'd better clear out before we lose our sense of humor. We ain't in the mood for practical jokers."

"I'm not moving out until you jaspers come with me," Wild Jack declared, his voice hardening. "And I'm not joking. A fine bunch, not even recognizing your own boss. I could damned quick whip one of you and put you straight, but that'd be too much trouble. Come on down to the barber shop."

"We'll do that," Murphy agreed. "And the razor'd better uncover the right face from under that bush or it'll be a long time before you feel like indulging in any funny business again."

HALF AN HOUR LATER the MacDaniels mule-skinners were on their ways to the various tasks assigned them, humbled by the change the shave had revealed to them in the face they still recognized as that of their once reckless, lighthearted, carefree and laughing-eyed boss. Wild Jack's orders had once carried the good-natured emphasis of physical might that made a man careful to carry them out. But now there seemed to be the force of a steel spirit behind them, giving rise in a man to an involuntary inclination to jump, as if touched by a keen-edged blade. And the network of steely-hard lines around his mouth and eyes seemed to bode no good for a laggard. So now the crew moved with quicker step than they might have in the years before; even though they could not help being deeply puzzled and had been offered no explanation as to why O'Brennen's Rocky Mountain outfit was to be given a lift after what they had done.

With them on their way, some to help with the wagon loadings and others to get the mules and harness ready for the trail, Wild Jack turned toward the jail.

Young Haw greeted his idolized older brother with surprise a little awed at the great change that was evident and apologetic about the circumstances. But his lack of alibi or excuses for himself pleased Wild Jack, renewed his pride in claiming the eighteen-year-old as his brother.

"Sure did myself proud," Haw declared ruefully. "Got sucked in and cleaned just like a bald-faced kid."

"Oh—you've started shaving since I've been away, huh?" Wild Jack joshed. "Don't beat yourself over the head any, kid. You were bucking the schemes of the most powerful outfit of freighters in this country — Transcontinental. It was their man working through the bullwhackers here.

"Now they're after the O'Brennen hide just as hard as they've been after ours. And I've got to save it—to get you out of here and to keep Transcontinental out of our territory. That gal's got me over a limb. With Transcontinental in the picture, you see, I've got no choice but to help her."

"I was pretty mad at her myself, the other day," young Haw grinned. "But she's not a bad gal, really. She's just always tomboyed around and learned to play rough, like a man."

Wild Jack snorted, remembering the jeopardy in which Haw's life had been only the night before because of the false

charge on which he was jailed. A charge Kate O'Brennen could disprove.

"Love's blind all right," he said. "You're welcome to her. Meantime, while I pay the lady off for testimony that'll get you out of here, you sit tight and don't get any notions about changing your scenery."

Leaving the jail, Wild Jack rode back to the warehouses and landing where the loading was going on. He had a couple of pieces of personal freight on the steamer that would have to be attended to, his trunk and a crate that weighed like lead.

Spying Big Red Kelly, Wild Jack motioned the man to him. The giant red-head approached with wary, watchful eyes.

"Give me a hand with this trunk," MacDaniels directed. Wordlessly the red-head complied. When it had been stowed in a corner of the nearest warehouse they returned to the crate.

"Where's the lead wagon of the first train?" MacDaniels asked then. Kelly's answer was to point out a big new wagon that gleamed with fresh paint. The sideboards still carried the MacDaniels Mule-Shoe brand, painted in the center of each with sharply contrasting color.

When Wild Jack stooped to catch the crate with his hook, the red-head followed suit with his hands. He straightened with a grunt under the strain of the crate's weight. A look of surprise akin to admiration came to his eyes as he realized MacDaniels was carrying his end with the crippled arm alone.

"What the hell you got in this anyhow?" Kelly panted, sweat popping out on his brow before they reached the lead wagon. "Gold?"

"Hardly," Wild Jack grunted. "Plenty of men die *for* gold, but I never heard of gold saving airy a man's life. This here's a little keepsake. I picked it up the day I lost this hand. It saved my life that day, and I had a soldier cache it for me when the ruckus was over so I could come back and pick it up when the war played out. I'm going to tote it along this trip for good luck."

"Sure an awful heavy rabbit's foot," Kelly declared. "Must be a cannon." But he got no further information. When they had stowed the mysterious crate directly under the seat of the lead wagon, dropped back to the ground breathing deeply from the exertion, Wild Jack had one question for Kelly.

"When's this outfit going to be ready to roll?"

"Any time after midnight, sir," the red-head answered.

VI

SUNDOWN was at hand, not only in the person of Wild Jack's roan mule but also in the western sky, when MacDaniels again saw Kate O'Brennen. She cantered up on a trimly built, sweat-stained bay as Wild Jack rode from one loading yard to another, keeping the work moving.

"Well, Transcontinental's man will have to go a mighty long way from here to find a Blackfoot interested in the warpath tonight," she greeted him. "His squaw-men friends pulled out when they saw me coming with those fat cattle. I almost envy the reds that eating."

"Good work," Wild Jack nodded dryly.

"Will they have the loading finished by midnight?"

"Kelly thinks so."

"I wouldn't wonder. The war's certainly made you a hard driver, hasn't it? I'd hate to have you for an enemy."

After a moment, with him offering no answer to that as if he had not heard, she said, "If the loading's finished by midnight, the men should be able to get a few hours' rest and be ready to roll by dawn, shouldn't they?"

"They'll be rolling by dawn," Wild Jack agreed.

"Then I think I'll go back to the ranch and spend the night with father. See that the help knows what to do while I'm gone. I'll see you in the morning then."

Wild Jack tossed her a casual salute in parting and reined on toward the next loading area. Here at the edge of the street before the horseshoe of loading docks were pulled up a wagon and trailer that looked small beside the freighters. One a grain wagon and the trailer a chuck wagon; accessories usually included in a train only when it was out to make unusual time. At the rear a well-banked fire was going, a grizzled old cook serving from fire and dutch oven as the men came to eat in relays.

"You bed down with your wagon tonight, Pop," Wild Jack instructed the oldster. "And be certain you've got everything you need before you do. We'll be long gone before any storekeeper's up in the morning."

From here he went to find Hub Murphy.

"Have one of the boys take a spare team and begin getting the loaded trains coupled up and lined out on the street. When Kelly pays off the swampers have the boys fade out, too—and get their teams. We'll have a good moon by one o'clock. I want to roll out of here, but with as few noticing it as possible."

"A night haul?" Murphy murmured.

"I want to hit that Sun River bridge before anything has a chance to happen to it. Beyond that there's nothing that fording would make much trouble."

After supper townsmen and livery-stable loafers began drifting by to watch as one by one the big three-wagon trains began to be pulled out, creaking under their heavy loads, to be strung out in marching file along the street. But by eleven the show was over. The last heavy load rolled out, the lanterns blown out, the warehouse doors closed and locked, the steamer's cargo decks deserted. Doc Towner appeared at Wild Jack's elbow as he watched Kelly paying off the swampers for Rocky Mountain. The MacDaniels skinners had already disappeared.

"Well, it's like old times," Towner sighed, "seeing freight move like it has around here lately. I hear the men are being paid the extra they'd made if it'd taken until morning."

Preoccupied, MacDaniels only nodded.

"Yes, that's your way," Towner mused. "No wonder men are always willing to strain themselves for you. I've got no worry about Trancontinental bringing ruin to Benton's freight trade now that you're back to take ahold of things. I'll assume the responsibility of turning Haw loose right now if you say so. Kate's told me—"

"I've made a bargain and I'll keep it," Wild Jack put in absently, his mind on the trail ahead trying to anticipate Flush Rankin's moves so that he missed the significance of Doc Towner's words. "I'd rather Haw stays where he is until he can leave with a clean slate. This trip'll give me all I need for that."

Towner's mouth opened as if to speak, then closed as if thinking of it. "Well, see you about dawn tomorrow," he said after a moment's silence. He moved away into the night.

The remaining onlookers, as if following his example, began to drift off upon their separate ways now. For a time there was a scattering of half-hearted boisterousness from various saloons as bone-tired swampers stopped for a drink before falling into their beds. But by the time the late moon showed itself Fort Benton was in bed; except for the feasting, rejoicing Blackfoot camp beyond the settlement's western outskirts.

TURNING Sundown into the bunch of loose stock, Wild Jack swung up to the seat of the lead train when the teams were hooked up and ready. Another time he would have saddled and ridden his near-wheeler. But for the night drive he could see better from the elevation of the wagon seat.

A gentle tug on the jerk line, a quiet-voiced word, a crack of his long whip, and Wild Jack's team came up into their collars and were moving. Behind, as one by one the other skinners followed his example, the train moved in behind him until all thirty of the heavy outfits were in motion. They rolled out of Fort Benton, past the old adobe-walled Agency and beyond the celebrating Blackfeet, with hardly a soul aware of their passing. For once, Wild Jack grinned mirthlessly, a mule outfit had gotten rolling without the usual yells and cursing.

From the first Wild Jack set and held a fast pace. The stock was fresh and the night was almost cold. There was more danger of dropping a wheel in a hole and breaking a tongue or axle of a heavily loaded wagon than of abusing the mules by rolling fast. But the road here was fairly good and Wild Jack was willing to chance it. It was fifty miles to Sun River crossing and forty miles was a good ten-hour haul for mules with such loads as he was rolling. But by sunup they pulled up at Twenty-eight Mile Springs, twenty-eight miles from the crossing of the flooded Sun.

After an hour of rest and grain and water for the mules they rolled on. Miles fell behind as the sun climbed the sky behind them. And shortly after the sun finished its climb to the zenith, Wild Jack rolled his wagons to the top of the last hill and looked down upon the flashing Sun River in the valley beyond. It rushed along, bank full, swollen and dangerous with spring thaw and rain. But the narrow bridge still stretched across it, either end guarded by the bullwhackers he had had Kate dispatch for that purpose. He had foiled one of the most serious blows that Flush Rankin might have dealt him.

"Had any traffic?" he called as he rolled past the guards at the near end.

"Just a gambler from town," one of them called back. "Guess he was headed for Helena."

Too late Wild Jack realized he had missed a bet by not having had the men instructed to turn Rankin back if he appeared at the bridge. It was the only one on the Sun. With the river flooded it was unlikely the gambler would have risked trying to ford it. He would have been stopped, and with a guard kept at the bridge the O'Brennen freight would have been far beyond his reach before he could have ridden upcountry far enough to ford safely. Instead he was ahead, to plan what treachery he might.

But Wild Jack MacDaniels had long since learned the futility of regretting mistakes already past. Instead his eyes looked to the future to anticipate whatever treachery Rankin might plan and in turn to lay plans of his own with which to meet it. He had expected that Rankin might try to destroy the bridge to delay their crossing, then ride far to the north into the heart of the Blackfoot nation to recruit rebellious young braves hungering for booze and glory and grateful for the offering of a fight that would yield them. That possibility Wild Jack had foiled effectively. To his practical mind that small success was sufficient for the moment. Having Rankin and his possible treachery on the trail ahead was better than having him behind recruiting Blackfeet.

"You boys can head back for town anytime you like now," he called to the other guards as he rolled off the far end of the bridge.

From there he turned his leaders up the fertile valley of the Sun for about a mile. There, at the edge of a richly grassed meadow, he pulled around a wide circle and brought the heavily laden wheels of the big outfit at last to a stop in their first camp. It was a place that appealed to the eyes of men and mules alike, in their need of food and rest.

A quiet feeling of satisfaction coursed through Wild Jack as he swung down to begin the chore of tending his mules. It was traditional that the first day set the pace for all that followed of a journey. Certainly no one could ask a better one than this. For the first time he really experienced the inward joy of homecoming. This was the life he had dreamed of coming back to, and he found it now as good as the dreams on death-strewn distant battlefields had made it seem. This was the work he had been born to.

THEN his meditative thoughts were ended. A buckboard drawn by fast-stepping horses appeared on the low hill that hid them from the bridge. Moments later he recognized Kate O'Brennen at the lines. Kelly and Luke Caldwell, his wounded arm in a sling, were with her.

"Why did you pull out so careful not to let me know when you were going?" Kate questioned, drawing to a stop beside him, quiet accusation in her blue eyes.

"I didn't see that it made a whole lot of difference to you," Wild Jack returned evenly. "You wanted this freight rolled in record time, and I'm rolling it. As long as I get that done I don't know that I owe you any accounting."

"You never considered that I might want to go along."

"I *wouldn't* have considered it. I still won't. Everyone that goes with this outfit has a job. I'm not rolling any dead freight, even if it's only one hundred pounds."

"How about that keepsake of yours?" red-thatched Kelly spoke up.

"This is no affair of yours, man," Wild Jack knifed the fellow with an icy gaze. "If you know when you're well off, you'll be satisfied to stay out of it. Kate wanting to go along is bad enough. But I won't have you or Caldwell on the same trail with me—except as outright enemies. One of you is a Transcontinental agent and spy.

I haven't the time to be watching you."

Luke Caldwell's face was still pale from the shock and pain of his bullet-maimed arm, but this charge brought a flush of color into it. And Kelly's yellowish eyes widened with comprehension.

"So that's why you made me get up out of bed against doctor's orders to come along on this trip?" Caldwell murmured with some show of irritation in the sidewise glance he gave Kate. "You've been listening to this—" his suave voice broke, dropped to a rasping snarl "—this *hero* of yours!"

"You ought to be glad you *can* get up out of bed," Kate put back at him sharply. "My father can't!"

"Yes! Thanks to this fellow's brother."

"We'll not discuss that—now."

"So this was all *your* doing," Wild Jack murmured, eyeing Kate.

"Yes," Kate nodded. "There's a man I want to find. And I want there to be no chance that he might get away. It may increase our danger, but before this trip's over—" she shrugged, knowing Wild Jack understood. "Now you'd better assign us to our jobs."

MacDaniels nodded, satisfied. "You'll help the cook. Caldwell can keep each skinner's nosebags grained up and help Kelly dope up the axles every time we stop. Besides keeping the wheels tended to, Kelly can keep that buckboard loaded up with good cook wood as we travel. But neither of you," his eyes flashed between the pair, "had better make the mistake of ever getting out of sight of camp or wagons. That's all the excuse I'll need for killing either of you. Get busy."

VII

SUNUP FOUND THEM ten miles on their way, rolling across Bird Creek and past the Eagle Rock stage station nestled below the sheltering sandstone ledges there. Straight ahead lay a short but hard climb up past the volcanic jumble called Bird Tail Mountains after the fan-shaped plug resembling the tail of a giant bird that stood at its head. But Wild Jack put the new sun to their backs, pulling west on the longer but easy rolling around the shoulder of the little range. He did not miss the questioning look in Kate O'Brennen's eyes as she rode alongside on his Sundown mule. The steep cutoff up and across Bird Tail Divide had become the established route for O'Brennen's plodding bull outfits, traveling as they did as fast up a heavy grade as on the level.

Benton Flats rolled under their wheels. Then the easy going down Sheep Creek, until it hit Flat Creek and the far junction of the two routes. They rolled through the shallow ford and past the place a bull outfit would have nooned. And the morning was still young. Acknowledgment was in Kate's eyes when they nooned ten miles beyond.

Sundown found them camped just south of the Dearborn. The tender at the Dearborn Stage Station walked across the bridge after supper to swap news.

"You rolling on south from Helena to hit the Jefferson at the Three Forks and roll up it into the Big Hole?" he asked, when he learned the outfit was bound for Bannack.

"Haven't decided," Wild Jack replied idly. "Why?"

"Well, it's some longer, but a lot easier drag than over the Continental. I just wondered," the fellow shrugged. "I hear a big bunch of Blackfeet showed up down there in the Three Forks country about a week ago. Come down for an early buffalo hunt. Ain't bothered the stages or nobody that I've heard of. I was just wondering. Reckon they wouldn't tackle an outfit this size though."

MacDaniels turned the talk to other channels, covering his real thoughts with outer indifference. But secretly he knew now why he had found all the bridges thus far unmolested. Flush Rankin was not wasting time on trivial and temporary detainments. When he struck his attack would come in one smashing sweep. His immediate and purposeful southward course made it all too plain that he had known, through his squawmen confederates, where to seek his reinforcements.

The only thought of comfort was that the trouble would be ahead a few days at least. Wild Jack sent all the men to their beds early, taking the watch by himself. At least they might as well have as many nights of undisturbed rest as possible before it came.

Before dawn they were under way, snak-

ing up the heavy ridge beyond the Dearborn. Dropping from there into Dead Man's Coulee. Toiling up another ridge, only to drop again, this time into Four Mile Coulee. The sun was well up by the time they splashed through the ford at Dog Creek. Up again, and then down the Black Grade into the gorge of Big Canyon.

The last time Wild Jack had made this trip the stretch through Big Canyon had been a treacherous bit of going. But now he found a newly completed toll road through it, and was not long in deciding the improvement was far more than worth the toll. He was beginning to feel the loss of last night's sleep, and when Kate O'Brennen came alongside of his Sundown mule, he called, "You seem to take to riding a mule. How'd you like to learn a little about skinning?"

"Sure mike!" Kate nodded, her eyes brightening. "I've been wanting to ask, but afraid if I did you'd sure turn me down." She knotted the reins around the saddle horn and swung up onto the wagon from the saddle, leaving the roan to shift for himself. She was sparkling with pleasure, Wild Jack noticed, as she settled on the high seat beside him, radiant, effervescent.

"Gee, an old bullwhacker's daughter skinning mules! Isn't that something?" she bubbled. "A morning like this I could almost forget how to worry, forget business. I guess this canyon helps," she wound up lamely, suddenly self-conscious, afraid he would not understand and turning his attention elsewhere.

Wild Jack nodded, his eyes appreciating the surroundings through which they rolled. For Big Canyon was a beauty spot. A spot a man remembered on hell-ripped nights, pinned down by rocket flares and shell fire with nothing to do through the long nightmarish hours but think—and wait for death. And thoughts of the contrasting peace of this place had often come to him; Big Canyon, with its little parks opening among the groves of fir and yellow pine, its luxuriant thickets of syringa, scrub maple and wild roses richly scenting the air with their heavy fragrance.

AND Kate O'Brennen's sudden and secret embarrassment vanished in an instant when she glanced sideways to catch the momentary look of remembrance that had been brought to Wild Jack MacDaniels' grey eyes to thaw the ice in them for that bit of time. There was a sly look of confidence in her blue-eyed, strong-jawed face when Wild Jack finally satisfied himself that she could handle the team on this stretch and, leaving her with instructions to rouse him immediately if she saw any possibility of difficulty ahead, crawled back atop the load under the heavy canvass top to catch a nap.

The mouth of Big Canyon rolled behind and they were well through Little Canyon before Wild Jack awoke. The going here was not so easy, for the toll road had been left behind. But Kate was handling the sixteen-head team of mules like a veteran, had not allowed the lead wagon's pace to drag any.

"Must be past noon, ain't it?" MacDaniels muttered thickly, poking his head out from under the wagon top to glance squint-eyed at the sun.

"A good while," Kate chuckled. "You slept through nooning like you were dead. Here, I fixed a lunch up for you. We're half way through Little Canyon, sleepy-head."

"A gal with your mule savvy born in a family of bullwhackers," Wild Jack growled wonderingly. "Don't seem possible. You'd make a mule-skinner, I reckon—with enough practice."

"That's the nice thing about being born a girl," Kate came back at him brightly as he bit into a thick sandwich. "A girl isn't stuck with the trade she's born to—like a man." She let Wild Jack take that for what it was worth. It seemed to take a lot of chewing, for a long silence built up between them.

That night found them circled out on the sagebrush flats along Silver Creek. Again Wild Jack stood the whole guard alone. And the next morning, after the rough going around the Scratch Gravel Mountains, an ugly little range of granite boulder-studded hills covered with a scraggly growth of stunted pine and sagebrush, Kate came aboard the lead train again. It was her hand that was on the jerkline up there when the sweeping panorama of purple-haze-filled Prickly Pear Valley rolled into view, spreading out below and beyond them. In the dis-

tance raised the smoke of the infant Helena, come to life in the midst of the fabulous and turbulent Last Chance Gulch diggings.

That night they camped at the parting of the ways. Here the Mullen Road turned west, made its tortuous way up five steep, hard miles to the Mullen Pass at the top of the world, then dropped as abruptly down the Western Slope into the broad valley of the Deerlodge. But the stage road turned south, through Last Chance and on toward the cherished hunting grounds of the Blackfeet in the country of the Three Forks, where the tumbling Jefferson, Madison and Gallatin poured together to make the mighty Missouri a full-grown river at its very beginning. And it was along that road that Flush Rankin had ridden.

Again Wild Jack took the guard. But this night, when the camp was asleep he roused Hub Murphy to take his place. Saddling Sundown, he reined west toward the pass, to make certain the hazardous road was unobstructed. For a little forethought on Rankin's part, a few sticks of well-placed dynamite, and they would have had no choice but to take the route that led into the Big Hole by way of the Jefferson, through the Blackfoot hunting grounds around the Three Forks.

But this time it was the wily Flush Rankin who had overlooked a good bet. Or was it, MacDaniels' practical mind suggested, merely that the fellow felt he was backing a sure thing, whichever trail took the outfit's liking?

HE CAME BACK to camp, bone-tired from the hard ride, in time to help the herder bring in the mules. And he was the first to notice that one of the fast buckboard bays was missing. Big Red Kelly's blankets under the buckboard were empty.

"Well, that settles one thing anyhow," Wild Jack declared when Kelly's absence became apparent to the whole outfit as they gathered for breakfast. "We didn't know who the spy was. Now we know. I just hope he comes along when Rankin hits us." His hard, sleep-reddened eyes turned upon Luke Caldwell frankly as he said, "I reckon I owe you an apology, mister. I had you tagged for the crook among us. Maybe I was biased by that speech you were making that night I showed up in Benton. I'm glad to know you're really Kate's man."

He received a cold nod from Caldwell by way of acknowledgment. "That mean I'm relieved of my duties as chief swamper and wheel flunkey?" the O'Brennen General Manager wondered.

"We've still got no place for dead freight," Wild Jack said evenly. "You can quit the outfit and take the stage back to Benton if you like." When that drew a negative headshake he shrugged. "You can't skin mules or cook, so the nose-bags and grease buckets are still in your charge. Don't neglect them."

That day Wild Jack had no opportunity to catch up on his sleep. The trail over the Continental was hard going that required the skill of a real skinner. He had no time to think of sleep, for a late spring snowstorm howled down upon the high country, making the rocky trail doubly slippery, sometimes closing down until he could hardly see the ears of his leaders.

But Wild Jack led the way to the top without accident. There he paused to check his brakes and send the order back. Then his wheels rumbled on the downgrade of the Western Slope. As heavy train after train hit the slope behind him the combined roar of their great wheels on the rocky way rose like thunder from the trail.

There was a long hour, frequently lengthened into timelessness by tense moments on the steep grades. Then the worst was behind. The sun broke through. The overcast ahead was clearing. Only a few miles of gentle ups and downs remained before they rolled into the fertile valley of the Deerlodge. And Wild Jack made camp early, when he found feed to his liking, giving the mules a needed rest after the battle through the mountains.

That night, for the first time, he assigned the crew to rotating watches and had the mules corralled inside the circled wagons after dark. Two more hard days would see them in Bannack; one more at the divide above the headwaters of the Deerlodge and looking down upon the Big Hole and its swarm of gold seekers. Tonight or tomorrow Transcontinental's ace henchman would have to spring his

treachery. Perhaps anyone but an old campaigner like MacDaniels would have considered the hopeful possibility that the fast travel and acceptance of the hard trail across the Rockies might have put them where Flush Rankin could not reach them in time. But if the thought occurred to Wild Jack he did not consider it.

This did not keep him from sleeping, however. And he was surprised when he awakened and found it morning with his sleep unbroken. On Sundown he made a scout before turning the work mules out for an hour's graze before they were harnessed.

When the outfit rolled that morning Kate O'Brennen was handling Wild Jack's team. He rode ahead on Sundown to scout the trail for ambush. But the broad valley of the Deerlodge was not well suited to such a purpose. Noon came and the peace was still unbroken. The highland loomed in the distance. Beyond lay the Big Hole and comparative safety because of the swarm of gold-hungry whites that infested it. But what lay between?

Afternoon wore on, with Wild Jack still scouting the country on both sides of the trail. Behind him the outfits' teams were straining up the first of the grades leading to the divide between the Deerlodge and the Big Hole. The last miles were just ahead. But this country, with its stunted growth of timber, was not to Wild Jack's liking. It was hard to find vantage points from which a man could really see the country around him fully.

He had just come to one of these, glancing back to the crawling train and the plume of dust that towered into the sky above it, when in a hollow abreast and at the far side of the freighters he sighted a riderless horse. Its empty saddle seemed like a warning. Wild Jack lifted Sundown into his ambling, mulish lope back down the slope.

He did not rein up when two or three miles below he dodged into the trail just ahead of the lead wagon. He only took time to rein down the line, shouting as he passed each wagon, "Keep your eyes peeled and your guns ready. Try to circle if you see anything suspicious."

Then he ducked back into the scrub growth toward the small valley just beyond where he had seen the empty saddled horse. At the crest of the low ridge above it he reined in and rode on with his gun in his hand, wary and unhurried.

He came, at last, to the edge of the open hollow. And then he saw that his caution had been needless. For the man who had ridden the forlorn horse lay now at the animal's feet, the reins anchored under his body. And even at that slight distance, Wild Jack could see the pair of feathered arrow shafts that bristled from the fallen man's back.

A moment later he recognized the horse. And then the rider. It was the missing member of Kate's buckboard team. And the red-thatched, bull-backed rider could be only Big Red Kelly.

VIII

WILD JACK found a feeble pulse-beat still in the man, but it was plain that he was not long for this world. An ordinary man would have been dead long since, with those two arrows in his back.

"Something musta backfired," MacDaniels mused. But a nagging doubt prompted him to get a flask from one saddlepocket.

For a moment, after pouring the shot of whiskey down the dying man, there was no response. He was in the act of lowering Kelly back to the ground then the big fellow's eyes fluttered open.

"Thank God," Kelly murmured, looking up into Wild Jack's cold eyes. "I ain't liked you, but I'm glad you're here now. Transcontinental's coming at you with about two hundred trade-whiskey-drunk Injuns just as soon as he can get'm here. Injuns don't like to fight at night, but he'll have'm so crazy drunk they won't know no difference. Good luck, soldier. You'll need it. He's playing for keeps." Kelly grimaced.

"How come they shot you up?" MacDaniels wondered. "You're Transcontinental's man, too, aren't you?"

"I guess I've taken Transcontinental money, but I didn't know it—it came from Luke for carrying a fight to your kid brother and I figured it was just on account of him being jealous about the girl," Kelly wheezed, blood bubbles ballooning and bursting upon his lips. "It was him hatched the plan to plug the old man and

frame the kid, but I didn't go for it. I didn't want to see the gal hurt. That's howcome I pulled out back at Helena. I went to find that gambler I heard you talking to in Benton the day your mule kicked me. I got wise after that. Figured out what was up. I wanted to tell him about the gal being with the outfit now—try to get him to hold off somehow. But he's set for a wipe-out. And me not really being a Trans—" Kelly broke with a feeble, gurgling cough, strangling on his own blood. His eyes fluttered. And then Wild Jack, who had seen death come many times, felt the will ooze out of him. Gently he laid Kelly back.

Too late MacDaniels realized how completely his attention had been straining to catch the dead man's last whispered words, and so unaware of small sounds that would have warned him otherwise. For he straightened to find himself unexpectedly looking up into the calculating, cynical, unfeeling eyes of poker-faced Flush Rankin.

"Friend of yours?" Rankin inquired in a tone of disinterest.

"One of yours, I thought," Wild Jack returned, instantly, regaining his complete composure.

"Nope," Rankin's head shook. He shifted in his saddle. "My friends don't die like that. Ah—what about that two thousand of mine?"

For the first time Wild Jack's eyes left the fellow for a quick glance around. He found a half circle of dirty, shaggy individuals, who would be the squawmen, looking on indifferently as they sat their saddles in the background.

"I guess you've got the cards that take the pot—this time," he murmured, his eyes coming back to Rankin.

"Every time," the fellow corrected. He watched narrowly as Wild Jack came to his feet from the pose in which he had held the dying Kelly. He accepted the bills MacDaniels extended a moment later, his air one of exaggerated indifference. A moment later Wild Jack knew why.

"I don't mind a man having guts enough to buck me," Rankin announced offhand, "if he's got brains enough to know when the game's over. I'll make a deal with you if you're smart enough to know a good thing when you see it."

He paused, as if for an answer. But when Wild Jack only continued to eye him and listen he went on.

"I'll put it to you without wasting time on fancy. I'm giving you a choice between this gal, whose outfit busted yours, and your kid brother. The boys here busted the jail at Benton a couple of nights back and grabbed the kid. They also busted the bank there for good measure. It was sorta left to look like the kid had been in on all of it. And then they come by the gal's old man's ranch and raised a little hell around there, just to be sure everyone would jump to the right conclusions.

"So, you see, the kid can't never go back to Benton no matter what you do here. You'd do just as well to play it my way. Pull out with your skinners. Leave that train set on the trail. Do that and I'll let you ride out of the country with your kid brother and nobody gets hurt. Otherwise I've got a bunch of reds that's all primed and ready for some bloodshed. They're liable to think that gal's got a right pretty scalplock."

"If you've got the kid, where is he now?" Wild Jack asked.

"Oh—we're keeping him put away in a safe place," Rankin shrugged elaborately, after one momentary hesitation.

MacDaniels scoffed. "You afraid to tell me—for fear I'll go take him away from you if I know where he is? Come on! Where is he?"

"Friend," the Transcontinental agent murmured, one eyebrow cocking up as if to emphasize the significance of his words, "it appears to me that you aren't in the best position possible to be asking too many questions—and demanding any detailed answers."

"Uh huh," Wild Jack snorted softly. "I thought so. Friend, the position I'm in I'd hate to appear insulting, but I think you're a dirty damned liar trying to get in a tall bluff on someone hereabouts. You haven't got that kid. You may have had him. I wouldn't doubt that. But you've either killed him or he's got away. Otherwise you'd produce him. A bird like you can't resist parading his hole-card when he's got this kind of a dead open shut-out."

"For the last time, is it the gal or your brother?" Rankin snarled.

"Go to hell!" Wild Jack mocked. He saw the squawmen urging their horses forward, closing in. This was it. But he'd take the Transcontinental spy with him. His left hand flashed to his holster and Rankin was almost too late in sensing the move. He socked the spurs to his horse as Wild Jack's heavy Colt leveled on him. The horse plunged into the skinner boss half a heartbeat too late to spoil his shot. But Rankin had ducked forward at the last second, and took the lead in his shoulder instead of through the heart.

Then Wild Jack was being bowled over, enjoying the sound of Rankin's screaming curses even as he fell. The next instant an avalanche seemed to drop on him, squawmen piling out of their saddles upon him from all directions. Faintly he heard Rankin bawling, "Don't kill that devil! I want the Injuns to kill him by inches."

"As big a damn fool as that kid, busting away from us and hightailing it back to Benton, ain't he?" a faint voice declared somewhere in the distance. Then Wild Jack could fight off the black void no longer.

The chill of high-country evening was in the air when he roused back to consciousness again. He jerked up. Then his mouth dropped open in surprise as he found Kate before him, interrupted in the action of daubing his brow with a wet rag.

"How'd you get here?" he muttered, his bruised jaws aching when he moved them.

"I circled the outfit, double-circled ready for trouble, then followed you," she whispered, as if quiet were imperative. "I was back there in the timber still when they rode up on you. All but one went to direct the Indians in attacking the wagons. I waited until the noise started a few minutes ago. Then I shot the guard." She shuddered.

"I'd better get to the wagons and help out," Wild Jack declared, struggling up, then pausing a dizzy moment with her steadying him. He found the renegade who had guarded him toppled over where he had been sitting upon Kelly's body. Helping himself to the fellow's weapons, he turned to go.

"You'd better stay hidden out in the timber," he suggested. But he did not argue with Kate's silent refusal.

The next half hour was taken in making their way through the timber along the ridge to a point near the circled wagons. The skinners had beaten the first charge off and the ground around the wagons had been left littered with Indian dead. Kate had managed to find a broad opening to circle the wagons in, where there was a wide and clear field of fire on all sides. Beyond that the position had no advantages. But the reds were thinking before charging it again. Seizing their opportunity, while Rankin and the other renegade whites poured more trade whiskey into the warriors to make them too crazy for any caution, Wild Jack and Kate sprinted across the quarter of a mile-open space between the timber and the wagons. Too late the attackers saw them and sent a hail of lead toward them. But the range was too great.

THANKFULLY the pair dived into shelter beneath the outer circle of big wagons. But they had hardly crawled on inside before Wild Jack realized something was wrong. The men were scattered around the well-fortified enclosure at firing positions. But there was an unnatural listlessness about them. A low moan raised from one here and there. Then Hub Murphy appeared with anxiety in his face.

"That damned grubslinger," he declared, breathing hard. "I can't find him. He's lit out. He did this apurpose."

"What is it, Hub?" Kate asked fearfully.

"Oh, I thought we'd as well eat while we were waiting for you and the boss to come back. I took the mules off to hide them out and was the only one that didn't eat. Right after I got back the boys started taking sick. Then the reds hit. We held them off the first time, but—" he glanced around hopelessly.

Kate had run to the deserted cook fire and spooned the contents of various pots out where she could smell them. She made a face.

"Spoiled meat," she announced tersely. "Spoiled in a kettle — deliberately. He was bought off since we left Benton or

he'd have brought regular poison along."

"Where's Caldwell?" Wild Jack asked.

"He ain't around neither!" Murphy exclaimed.

Wild Jack glanced at Kate. She was nodding.

"He's the one who shot father. Smells like an old pipe from tobacco. Smooth. Sneaking. Why couldn't I have been sure before!"

"They're coming!" a weak voice raised in sudden warning. Then the others caught it, the distant thunder of drumming hoofs. A moment later they materialized from the evening's shadows, a horde of hideously painted, screeching demons.

"Hold them, boys!" Wild Jack yelled. "Just this one more time. Then I'll take care of the devils."

He wheeled to Hub. "Where's the lead wagon? Come lend me a hand."

The second charge was smashing in close now. Powder smoke began raising its stench into the air. Pounding hoofs, roaring guns, screams, whoops, curses—the blend was a hellish din. And Wild Jack charged through it, hot lead rattling against wagon boxes around him like hail. His wagon, with its mysterious keepsake, was catching the attack's full force.

But just before he reached the wagon the second charge against the freighters broke, the firing dying out as it washed back. Quickly he pulled the heavy crate from the wagon and with Hub's help hauled it back into the enclosure.

"What is it?" Kate asked breathlessly, appearing with a smoking rifle in her hands, as Wild Jack knocked the crate apart.

"A Gatling gun," Wild Jack answered. "Shoots square bullets against Turks and round ones at Christians. I reckon redskins ain't particular what kind carry their numbers. The old girl saved my bacon for sure the day I lost my hand, and I adopted her for keeps. I reckon she'll throw some weight our way in this little deal. Just wait till I get her wound up—" he promised, lifting the gun from the crate and quickly assembling it. With it settled on its tripod mount a moment later he broke open a belt of ammunition and fed it into place. Then he swiveled the gun toward the opening at which the Indians had just charged, meaning to fire a few bursts in demonstration. But nothing happened, except that the ammunition rolled through the firing chamber and on out the other side.

"Firing pin!" Wild Jack exclaimed. "Where the hell could *it* have got to?" Quickly he rummaged around, feeling in all the corners of the crate. But to no avail. With a sigh he came to his feet. "Well, I almost hated to use it against the redskins anyhow."

Just then another whisper of alarm flew around the enclosure. "They're coming again!"

"This is about the last time the boys will be up to turning them," Hug Murphy muttered. "They're traveling on straight nerve right now. But they can't possibly hold on very much longer."

Whatever tight spots he had been in before, Wild Jack realized, he had never been in any worse one than this would be if he didn't do something and do it quick. For this was just as deadly, and in addition to the brave men about him was Kate O'Brennen. With a sensation almost like physical sickness he realized her peril; recognized consciously for the first time the great change that had come about in his feeling for her since the day they rolled away from Sun River. And in the same thought he denied himself, reminding himself that she was Haw's, and so even more must be brought safely through the peril now closing upon them.

"Dynamite!" Wild Jack wheeled around to stop Murphy as he started to run to a firing post to meet the charge they could hear beginning. "Haven't we got even one case in this pile of stuff for that damned mining country?"

"Yes!" Kate cried. She turned and ran toward a wagon on the far side. Sprinting to catch her, Wild Jack thanked God again that the girl was such a freighter, for even he hadn't gotten time to study the loading sheets this trip.

AS IF knowing his intention, the Blackfoot horde swept forward again through the last feeble light of the gathering dusk, as if to stop whatever plans he had aborning. This time they came on like deathless fiends, their unearthly whoops raising a thought-numbing din. But Kate seemed not to hear. She ducked

into one great freighter, and a moment later made Wild Jack catch his breath as she heaved out a heavy case of the sudden death he'd asked for.

This time the charge seemed beyond all stopping. At least beyond stopping by men who forced sick bodies to fight on with the power of will alone. In spite of their best the attack washed over, a warrior breaking through into the enclosure, whooping his triumph and charging the nearest white. Another hurtled through behind. The whole force was spearheading in behind them.

Just in time Wild Jack whipped up with the first bundle of capped, fused and fired dynamite. He hurled it into the very face of the oncoming, kill-crazy horde. Before it had reached them Kate handed him a second bundle, the short fuse spitting fire. And then a third.

Concussion from the first crude bomb, exploding just beyond the wagons, knocked Wild Jack sprawling as it shattered the mounted mass of onrushing warriors.

Beyond the circled wagons howls of anguish lifted from the maimed, were blotted out by the second blast and then the third. Echoes boomed through the surrounding hills, rolling away. Then they were set up again as Wild Jack scrambled up and hurled three more charges far out into the gathering night among the bewildered reds. Those who survived were turned cold sober. They fled in confusion. After that the night's quiet settled down.

But another alert was sounded at the break of dawn. From the north, coming up the trail toward them, they caught the thunder of many hoofs.

A few minutes later the approaching cavalcade rolled into sight. And instead of hot lead, a shout of joyous greeting went out to meet them. Fort Benton's marshal and Haw MacDaniels rode in the lead, and behind were a good percentage of the settlement's able-bodied.

"Haw got the idea of what was up out here before he got away from that squaw-man bunch that knocked me over the horns and took him outa jail," the marshal grinned. "First time I ever had a prisoner come back and wake me up. We spread the news around a little—and here we are."

"We sure were afraid maybe we were too late though." It was Doc Towner first who had dismounted. "Especially just about a mile back down yonder. There's about ten whites down there all butchered up until you can't tell who most of them are. I did make out Caldwell and your cook among them. And one, I'm certain, was a gambler from Benton."

"Thank God," Wild Jack murmured. "I was afraid maybe they'd got clean away. I guess I owe them Injuns a heap of thanks after all."

"And before I forget," Doc Towner's hand closed on Wild Jack's arm, a sparkle in his old eyes, "I want you to know that Kate told me all about Haw not being the man who shot Grizzly. Told me before you ever left Benton. I offered to have Haw turned loose to make the trip with you, but you seemed to have other things on your mind."

Things were making sense again for Wild Jack. "That's a good idea," he boomed, thanksgiving swelling through him, "because—"

HE TURNED to catch Haw by a shoulder and draw him close, murmuring, "I've got to know this Kate girl some on this trip, kid, and if she's what you want I'll announce a wedding for Bannack. You'll never find a better one, you lucky—"

"What!" Haw exploded with unbelieving surprise. "What you talking about anyhow?"

"Why, about you and Kate getting married and—"

"What about me and Kate? You wasn't talking about us when you mentioned getting married! Why, she wouldn't have me for nothing—nothing but a brother-in-law. Good gosh! Don't you know nothing? She's been gone on you since she was a brat in pigtails, always trailing me around for an excuse to be where she could watch you. Did you think—? Oh, surely you ain't that dumb!"

Eyes wide with incredulity, Wild Jack's head whipped around to find Kate at his other elbow, a quiet smile of amusement playing across her wind-browned but finely chiseled features.

"Is he talking—sense?" he demanded.

"Why don't you ask me—and see?"

Something flew at Rocklin, something that scalded!

AMBUSH HOUSE

By JOSEPH CHADWICK

THE SERGEANT'S SHADOW marched smartly beside him—around from the stables and the blacksmith shop, past B Company barracks, and diagonally across the parade ground. It was a substantial shadow, for the sergeant was a big and broad man and the Arizona sun glared brightly upon the hard-packed soil of Fort Dubrow. The sergeant hit the walk running along Married Officers' Row, where at one frame house an orderly was doing some carpenter work. The orderly said, "Hi, Sarge," and received no reply, not even a nod.

An officer came from another house and passed the sergeant on the walk. He snapped, "Sergeant!" And the sergeant, halting abruptly, about-faced and came to

Sergeant Rocklin went "over the wall"—deserting, courting death and despair in the canyon country. He did this for a girl—and for the other man she really loved.

rigid attention. His wooden face slowly reddened.

The officer said, with mild sarcasm, "Rocklin, it's the custom for commissioned officers to rate the salute from enlisted men. You remember?"

"I beg the captain's pardon, sir," said Rocklin. "I did not see him."

"Trouble with your eyes, sergeant?"

"No, sir."

The officer frowned. "Rocklin, you've been acting damn' odd, lately. Maybe some extra duty . . . " He paused, thinking it over. "Never mind. Carry on."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

Rocklin saluted. His was a brisk salute, that of a good soldier—not that of a man planning, come nightfall, to go over the stockade wall.

Rocklin went on, a clouded expression in his metal-gray eyes. His face, red-brown —bronzed, some artistic soul would have

called it—from scorching sun and desert wind, remained inscrutable. What thoughts he had, what inner feelings, were never shown upon that almost grim countenance. But the officer's rebuke had jabbed him, a saber cutting into his soldier's soul. *A small thing,* he told himself, yet could not put it from his mind.

A horse stood before the last house in the Row, a girl beside it. The horse was a gelded gray, rigged with a side saddle. The girl was tall and slender, in her fashionable riding habit, yet rounded nicely in a man's eyes. The two of them—horse and girl—made a pleasant picture. Rocklin halted.

"You wished to see me, Miss Nan?"

"This horse, Sergeant, seems about to throw a shoe."

Their eyes met, two pairs of gray eyes full of understanding. Rocklin said, "I'll have a look," and, bending, lifted the gray's left fore-leg. He said, "You'll tell Ed Webley that tonight is the night?"

"Yes, Jim," whispered Nan Blair. "I'll tell him. But are you sure—?" There was worry in her voice. "It's such a risk, such a chance to take. You're a born soldier, Jim, and to desert . . . "

Rocklin still was making a show of examining the gray's hoof. He said, "Tell Webley to have the horse and the pack animal in that stand of cottonwoods an hour after dark. Grub for two weeks, and ammunition, too. A saddle gun, and a six-gun . . . Tell him that if he crosses me up, I'll cut his throat." He heard the girl's sharply drawn breath and looked up. "I mean it. Tell him."

AGAIN their eyes met, and now there was fear as well as worry in those of Nan Blair. Rocklin lowered the gray's hoof; he thought better of it, and lifted it again. An enlisted man was out of bounds in talking to an officer's daughter; this thing must be done covertly. Rocklin said, "This thing is taking a lot of money."

"Never mind the money," said the girl. "It's mine . . . money I inherited from my mother."

And Rocklin thought bitterly, *Yes, you are a girl with money. You're an officer's daughter, too. And besides, you're in love with that poor fool I'm risking prison to help* . . . All that stood between them, and yet when he looked at Nan Blair—when he felt her nearness—he was not himself. She could make him know that he was a man as well as a soldier.

He said, "Nan, I'll do my best."

"I know you will, Jim. And afterward?"

"I don't know. I'll come back and stand court martial, maybe, and that will mean prison. It does not matter."

"You'll be done as a soldier, forever."

"A small thing, that."

The girl shook her head in denial. "Not a small thing for a man like you," she told him quietly. "When it is over—entirely over—send word to me. There'll be a place for you on the ranch I inherited from Mother. And Jim—I'll never forget."

Boot steps sounded. A brusque voice said, "Rocklin, how long does it take you to examine a loose shoe—that maybe isn't loose?"

Rocklin put down the gray's hoof, and straightened to face an irate officer. The dull red of anger stained Captain Len Grierson's sun-darkened cheeks; his high temper showed in his dark eyes. A handsome man, Grierson, and as big as Rocklin. Broad of shoulder, slim of hips; born to wear uniforms. And vain. He sported a clipped black mustache. His every movement was a swagger. His dark gaze left Rocklin for Nan Blair, and, for an instant, there was desire in them instead of rage. But his voice was unchanging, even for her.

"You're riding this mount, Nan?"

"Yes, Len."

"You can handle it without Sergeant Rocklin's assistance?"

"Now, yes."

Grierson swung back to Rocklin. "Sergeant get back to your duties. You're out of bounds."

The eyes of the two men met, and the look exchanged had behind it smouldering feelings which would have burst into flames had they been of equal rank. There was that hatred in Grierson's eyes; yes, Rocklin could see hatred. And it was not a thing he understood. It had been coming on over a period of six months, growing into a poorly concealed hostility. Rocklin was not yet ready to believe that Grierson was involved in that ugly affair which now, coming to a head, was causing him to plan desertion. Yet there was no other reason

for that hostility, for that unmasked hatred.

"You hear me, Rocklin?" Grierson demanded. "I've given you an order."

"I've heard the captain," said Rocklin, and he saluted and turned away. His face was still unreadable as he recrossed the parade ground. But his big shoulders sagged a little. Rocklin and his broad shadow . . . this was the last time they would march across Dubrow's familiar grounds.

Now and then, a trooper sickened of cavalry life on the frontier and deserted. Going over the stockade wall, it was called, but actually such a man went through the timber wall. Behind the stables was a place, known to every enlisted man, where a rough-hewn log could be moved enough out of plumb to permit the passage of even the burliest body . . . Rocklin waited until an hour after "lights out."

TWELVE YEARS a cavalryman, and now a deserter. Rocklin silently and in the deepest shadows made his way from the sleeping B Company barracks. He'd left behind saber and pistol, his uniform tunic, his spurs (for silent prowling) and his few spare pieces of Army issue dress. He'd left behind too some part of himself . . . The stables now: Rocklin made it unseen. He heard the measured, lazy tread of a sentry. He waited until the guard was at the far end of the stables, then made his bolt to the rear of the squat building. He was breathing hard now, from excitement. The thought jumped into his mind, *I can still go back—still back out!* And for an instant his resolve did waver. But then he moved on through the dark, feeling his way along the stockade wall and searching for that secret exit.

His booted foot struck some object that broke with an explosive sound. A bottle discarded by some late returning trooper after an evening's visit to the nearby town. Rocklin's heart pounded, for he was certain that accidental sound had been heard. It had! That sentry he had heard now called out, "Who goes there?" in a jumpy voice.

Rocklin was at the loose timber, now, and prying it from its groove.

"Halt!" shouted the sentry. "Halt—or I'll fire!"

Rocklin thought, *"Some loud-mouthed rookie!"* and then was squeezing through the opening. Behind him the nervous sentry let loose with a blast of his carbine. The roar of the weapon was like thunder. The sentry was bawling now for the corporal of the guard, and Rocklin was running through the night. Rocklin, the deserter.

Ten long and desperate minutes later, Rocklin plunged into the stand of cottonwoods by Broken Yoke Creek. A voice jumped softly at him from the darkness. "Rocklin, that you?"

Rocklin said, "Here, Webley," and a grizzled old man came forward leading a black horse that had a white blaze upon its hammer head. Rocklin, still panting for breath, stared at the horse and then at the bewiskered old man. Ed Webley was an old Indian scout and buffalo hunter, an odd jobs man now. There was a sour smell of whiskey about him.

Rocklin said, "The pack animal, Ed?"

"I figured you might be in a hurry, Sergeant," Webley said, "so I hid the pack horse out at Bald Rock, in the brush. By the noise coming from the post, I reckon I did right."

"Ed, if you took Nan Blair's money and got me no supplies—"

"Hell, man, trust a fellow human," said Ed Webley, and thrust a sixgun into Rocklin's hand. "Saddle gun in the black's boot, Sergeant. You're ready to ride. You want some advice, friend?"

Rocklin thrust the pistol into the waistband of his breeches, took the black's reins, swung to the saddle. "What advice?" he asked.

"Don't trust any man from now on—or any woman," said old Ed Webley. "You've asked for a hand in an ugly game, and the first wrong play you make will mean your death. Head for Ambush House, bucko—and luck be with you. You'll need it!"

Rocklin grunted and let the black out. He was out of the cottonwoods and splashing across shallow Broken Yoke before the thought occurred to him that he might have done well to question Ed Webley. Now, too late, he realized that the old man seemed to know more about this crazy death-game than he had a right to know. Too late . . . for behind Rocklin, at Fort Dubrow, a bugle was sounding—loud in the night.

II

ROCKLIN lifted the black into an easy lope, not feeling the need for urgent haste. Knowing garrison life, he was sure that there would be no pursuit. A deserter was, after all, only a deserter. All that tumult and shouting back at Fort Dubrow, set off by that skittish sentry, would die down once the cause of it was discovered—not to be an Apache raid. Rocklin's grim face half smiled over the thought of the uproar at the post—a carbine blasting, a sentry scared half out of his wits, the corporal of the guard shaken out of a doze, the officer on duty barking orders, the bugle sounding, troopers rousing and cursing and rattling sabers . . . But there would be no pursuit. Fort Dubrow sent out deserter-hunting details every so often, so deserter Sergeant Jim Rocklin would not be sought until later.

Rocklin did not head due west toward Bald Rock, the place where old Ed Webley claimed to have left a pack animal. He swung north and took the San Mateo road. The San Mateo Indian Agency was three miles along it.

With his first glimpse of lighted windows ahead, Rocklin reined in and took the six-gun from his waistband to check its loads. He went so far as to remove one or two of the cartridges, to weigh them in his palm and frown over them. He did not want to be caught with salted loads. Rocklin was following old Ed Webley's advice; he was trusting no man and no woman, from now on—not even Webley himself. Satisfied with the weapon, Rocklin rode on toward the three or four patches of yellowish light that were the agency's windows.

Some dogs started a crazy yelping as Rocklin rode in amid the scattering of log and adobe buildings. Two came rushing out of the darkness, putting up a clamor of barking. Rocklin said, "Down, you—Quiet!" And his voice turned them away.

A man came to the doorway of one of the houses, asking, "Who's there?"

"Rocklin—from Dubrow. I want to see Brassard."

"Oh, sure, Sergeant . . . You'll find Mr. Brassard yonder."

Yonder was a big squat log and adobe building, the office and living quarters of Indian Agent Sam Brassard and his young Mexican wife. It was by a side door, between two lighted windows, that Rocklin dismounted. He left the black ground-hitched, then stepped to the door and knocked. Brassard's voice was curt. "What is it?"

Rocklin felt of his sixgun, then reached for the door latch. He said, "Rocklin," as he pushed the door open and stepped uninvited into the room that was Brassard's parlor. Brassard, a big man because he was fat, started to heave himself out of his horse-hair stuffed armchair. His heavy face showed a startled look.

Rocklin closed the door behind him, stood with his broad shoulders against it. The room with its pattern of light and shadows was big and comfortable. A small fire blazed in the hearth, and Brassard's pretty dark-haired wife was heating a kettle of water there. There was a tea pot and cups set out on a small table. Rocklin thought, *Brassard sipping tea—hell!* He waited for the fat man to talk.

Brassard said, out of the chair now, "What's this, Rocklin?"

"Time's up, Brassard. Six months have passed. Remember back to the Paymaster's detail that was half-wiped out near Ambush House?" Rocklin saw the shot of fear in Brassard's beady eyes. "Yes, the time is up, my friend. I'm waiting no longer. You're going to talk!"

The woman said something in excited Spanish, but Brassard said, "No, stay where you are Maria." The woman was fashionably dressed in blue silk; there was a cameo brooch at her throat, a gold bracelet on her right arm, a ring on her right hand that held a glittering stone. Rocklin took that all in, remembering that Brassard had gotten his wife out of a grubby Mex village—that she had been the daughter of a poor sheepherder. The money that had prettied her up certainly had not come from her home. And certainly it had not come out of Brassard's wages as Indian Agent. A thing to know, to wonder about.

Brassard said, in a choked voice, "Talk? What about, Rocklin?"

Rocklin took a slow step, then another. They carried him deep into the room, and close to the fat man. He said, "About your part in that raid, Brassard. I want to know what you did—for your part of the loot."

"My part! You accuse me—?"

"Stop hedging, Brassard."

"I'll report this — you, Rocklin — to Captain Grierson at Dubrow."

"Grierson, eh? Why not to Major Hadley, the commanding officer?" Rocklin drew his sixgun. He heard the woman's sharp gasp, but he ignored her and kept his metallic gaze upon Brassard. "You and Grierson . . . Two of a kind, maybe. Somebody gave out the word about the Paymaster's detail, somebody at Dubrow—and Grierson could be that somebody. He knew the day it was due at the post, by what route it was coming." He saw how Brassard's gaze clung to the sixgun in his hand. "Grierson sent word to you, Brassard, and you sent out some Apache bucks—a dozen of them, armed and full of fight. Half the men in the detail were wiped out. The lieutenant in command of it stood court martial, was sent to prison—"

"For drunkenness, Rocklin!"

"Sure, I know about him. I want to know about *you!*"

Beads of sweat stood out on Brassard's face. "I know nothing, Rocklin. Why, I'm an honest man! Would I take such a chance, risk so much? Look, man, the Army investigated. Lieutenant Warren was found guilty of drunkenness, of half a dozen other charges. The blame was his. He lost half his men, all his horses, to a band of reservation-jumping Apaches. It has happened a hundred times—"

"The Paymaster's safe was gone, Brassard."

"The Apaches burned the wagon."

"The safe couldn't have burned. And it wasn't there in the ashes of that burned Army ambulance." Rocklin shook his head in denial of all the agent's arguments. "Apaches wouldn't bother with a safe, Brassard. There were white men mixed up in that raid. You were one of them. I've listened to the whispered talk for six months, talk that just won't die out. Brassard, the men who died in that raid were friends of mine. Lieutenant Warren was my officer . . . " He took one more step toward the man, cocking his pistol. "I swore, Brassard, I'd make you talk—or silence you forever. A bullet in that fat belly of yours. . . "

"Rocklin—no!"

Brassard's word's were like a wail. Now the man was jumping backwards, moving with amazing lightness for so heavy a person. Rocklin, intent upon his antics, had forgotten the woman. Now, from the corner of his eye, he saw Maria Brassard make a threatening movement. Something flew at Rocklin, something that hit the left side of him—face, shoulders, arm, ribs—and scalded him. He cried out, fell backwards two stumbling steps, dazed and full of pain. Maria Brassard stood staring at him, the kettle from the fire now empty in her hands, and there was a look of hysteria about her. She began to scream, uttering excited words of Spanish. And Brassard, given his chance, had fled. There was a doorway at the far end of the room, and he was gone.

The pain of the scalding water was almost unendurable, and Rocklin turned and stumbled from the room. He was like a man trying to flee from torture, but even when he was mounted on the black and riding into the darkness—away from the uproar now lifted at San Mateo—the pain was with him. A burn, Rocklin now knew, was the worst sort of pain. . . .

ROCKLIN KNEW that he must have treatment for his aching burns, for a large portion of his skin had been scalded; there was danger of infection, if he did not have some sort of doctoring, and that would mean sickness. For the first few minutes after riding away from the Agency, Rocklin was so full of pain and disappointment that his mind had no logical thoughts. He could only hate Brassard—yes, and Brassard's woman—and curse his failure to make the man talk.

But then came the realization that he must see to his burns. He swung south, heading for the Trumbull Ranch, and an hour later he had roused Ike Trumbull and was having a greasy ointment, which the rancher kept about the place for various ailments, smeared over his left cheek and down over his neck, left shoulder and arm and side. The ointment soothed; it would, though Rocklin gave that no thought, save him from disfiguring scars. When Ike Trumbull finished his crude doctoring, he gave Rocklin a stiff drink of green whiskey.

"Stay over night," Trumbull invited.

"Can't, friend," said Rocklin. "I'm over the stockade wall."

"You, Rocklin?" disbelievingly.

"That's it, Ike."

He rose from his chair by the kitchen table, took up his hat. The rancher was staring at the sixgun thrust into his waistband, asking no probing questions even though his eyes were curious. Rocklin felt he owed the man something, at least an explanation. He said, "Ike, you remember the Apache raid near Ambush House, six months back?"

Trumbull nodded.

"My deserting has something to do with that," said Rocklin.

"So somebody is doing something about that at last, eh?" said Ike Trumbull. "You, on your own, Rocklin? Well, even a blind man could have seen that there was more to that raid than met the eye. A safe stolen, wasn't it? And the Army pay for Fort Dubrow? I always did figure some of those 'Paches were white-skinned." He eyed Rocklin gravely. "Friend, you are meddling in a dirty game. Me, I would not want to be in your boots."

III

ALONG ABOUT MIDNIGHT, by the stars, Rocklin picked up the pack animal hidden at Bald Rock by old Ed Webley. He headed north again until he hit the Fort Dubrow-Tulane wagon road. The road lifted into the rock hills, and there were silver mines at Tulane; it was a country where a man could lose himself and hide out. By daybreak, Rocklin found a canyon that had water and was a suitable hole-up. He unsaddled the black, removed the pack from the paint horse. Ed Webley had provisioned him well. In the pack were supplies for at least three weeks; bacon, beans, flour, coffee. There was also a change of clothes, important to a deserter. Rocklin got out of his uniform and into a gray cotton shirt, a pair of brown jeans, Texas boots, and a flat-crowned black sombrero. . . . The rig fitted him, and he knew Nan Blair's hand had done the selecting. Nan's touch too could be found in the leather pouch that was in a pocket of the jeans. It was a money poke—two hundred dollars in ten-dollar gold pieces.

Rocklin built a fire and cooked up a meal. He ate mechanically while the new sun came up. Then, the grub put away, he filled and lighted his pipe and settled himself down on the north side of a jagged rock spire. His shoulder and side now ached throbbingly again, and would he knew keep him from getting the sleep he needed. He sat there smoking, with his back to the rock, and let his thoughts wander one way and another.

A strange thing, his being mixed up in this game. He had had no part in it, in the beginning. He had not been with the detail that was ambushed on the desert. What he knew, he had learned by word of mouth—much of it hearsay, or ugly gossip.

And what he did know? A detail of twelve troopers under Lieutenant Brad Warren, an officer new to the frontier, had been sent to Fort Mowbray—a distance of one hundred twenty miles—to meet and escort back the Finance Officer, a Major Hanlon. Hanlon traveled in an Army ambulance, which hauled his paymaster's safe. There had been thirty thousand dollars in that safe, part of it pay for officers and men at Fort Dubrow.

The first half of the return march had been uneventful, but then—at the Forsythe Ranch where a night camp was made—the detail was given a warning about a big band of Apaches on the prowl. And the following day, the small troop cut signs of Indians. It was testified at the court martial by survivors that late in the afternoon two Apaches kept the detail under surveillance from a distance of perhaps two miles. . . . At the court martial, Lieutenant Warren had said, in his own defense, "I could not know how big a band of hostiles it was. At the Forsythe Ranch, I was told that it numbered about eighty warriors."

Actually, there had been but a dozen Apaches in the band. But the ambush was so well laid, in such difficult terrain, and the condition of the troopers was so bad, that those dozen Apaches cut the detail to pieces. Lieutenant Warren, it came out at the court martial, had been drunk that next morning when he led his detail into the ambuscade.

"Drunk!"

Rocklin swore a round oath out loud, even though there was no one to hear his exclamation of disbelief. He had known Lieutenant Brad Warren but four months, yet he had judged the man to be a sound

officer. Yet that was the testimony. Warren had been drunk. . . . and most of his men had been in a sorry state after a night of hard drinking. The detail had spent the night at Ambush House, a notorious trading post and stage station at one of the most desolate spots on the wastelands.

"I put in at Ambush House to make night camp," the officer had testified at the hearing, "because it afforded shelter against attack."

But he could not deny the charge of drunkenness. . . .

Jim Rocklin gave a start, came suddenly wide awake with every nerve and fiber of his being taut. He had fallen asleep over his thoughts; his pipe had dropped to the ground, and the brassy sun had climbed high in the pale sky. Something had reached his sleeping mind, some threat. He came to his feet, wincing at the pain that darted through his widely spread burns. He gazed about and saw his two horses grazing some distance back in the canyon. He looked north, toward the canyon's high-walled mouth, and saw a figure on horseback.

Pursuit, already?

Rocklin went for his saddle carbine, then made himself small among the rocks. Watching the rider, he knew that the man was following his trail. Yet it could not be pursuit; the Army would not send one man alone to hunt a deserter, and that man a civilian. The horsebacker disappeared behind a tangled growth of mesquite, then reappeared again much closer—and Rocklin breathed a relieved sigh. The rider was old Ed Webley.

Stepping into the open, Rocklin waved the old Indian scout in. And Webley, reining in a few minutes later, said, "Rocklin, you're no hand for this sort of game. You leave too broad a trail. If I could trail you, so could some others." He eyed Rocklin's died-out campfire and the coffee pot and fry-pan beside it. "My belly's empty. Didn't eat since late yesterday. Rocklin, the girl sent me."

Rocklin said, "Light and eat. I'll rustle you some grub."

It wasn't until after that was done, with Webley patting his filled belly with contentment, that Rocklin said, "Why did Nan Blair send you, Ed?" He was uneasy, knowing that something had gone wrong.

"Sergeant, she wants you to forget this thing."

"Ah?" said Rocklin. "She does, now?"

"She's plumb scared, after what happened last night—scared for you." Webley eyed the burn marks on Rocklin's face and neck. "And I'd say, bucko, that she's right. You keep on, you're a goner."

ROCKLIN was again hunkered down in the shade of the rocks; now he lighted his pipe, and frowningly smoked. So Nan was calling him off. For months, she urged him to help her find out the truth about the affair at Ambush House. she had urged him to help her find out the turn to; she had turned to him, she explained, because he always had been friendly toward her—of course Nan could not know that he, a mere enlisted man, had lost his heart to her!—and because Lieutenant Warren had spoken so highly of him . . . At the time, Rocklin had wondered if Nan had not guessed that he already was probing—keeping eyes and ears open and asking a question here and there—into the ambush . . . He remembered that he had almost refused to help her, out of a sudden secret jealousy. But in the end he had given his promise. He would help her clear the name of Lieutenant Brad Warren, the man Nan Blair had come to love.

"So now she wants it ended," Rocklin said. "Just why, Ed?"

"You're not going to like this."

"Talk up, Ed."

'Well, all hell broke out at the post when you went over the wall. A fool sentry shot off his carbine—and his mouth. The corporal of the guard, a bigger fool, must have thought it was an Apache raid." Ed Webly paused to chuckle. "But all that wouldn't have mattered. It was Sam Brassard's showing up that did the trick. Brassard claimed you'd tried to kill him and his wife—and would have, if he hadn't beaten you off . . ."

Rocklin's lips curled in a wry smile.

"I heard all this from Nan Blair, Rocklin," Webley went on. "Major Hadley, the post C.O., being sick, Captain Grierson is in command at Dubrow. Brassard and Grierson got their heads together—and this is what you won't like, friend."

"Go on," said Rocklin.

"The two of them worked it out, like a couple of tinhorn sharpers. Brassard claims now that he's been investigating that raid on the Paymaster's detail. He says that he's learned from his Apaches that there were white men involved—a wild bunch from over Tulane way, friends of yours. He swears you learned that he was getting the goods on you, and so tried to silence him with a bullet. Rocklin, from now on your hide won't be worth a plugged peso."

Rocklin was jolted, and for once his grim face showed his feelings.

"So that's their game, now?"

"That's it, Rocklin. You see how it will be? You'll be wanted, and if you stay in these parts you'll be caught sooner or later. But they'll never let you live to stand any sort of trial. You've heard of men being killed trying to escape . . .?"

Rocklin nodded. He understood now why Nan Blair wanted him to quit this dirty game. She was thinking of him now, instead of Lieutenant Brad Warren. There was fairness in the girl, along with her loyalty.

"Best thing for you to do, Rocklin," Webley went on, "is to head out of the Territory—lose yourself in Mexico or California. You see?"

Rocklin said, "I see. But I'm not turning tail, Ed."

"The girl wants it."

"There's more than the girl to this," said Rocklin flatly. "I'm damned as a deserter now, but still I'm an Army man. And it was the Army that was victimized in that raid. Thirty thousand dollars, Ed . . . Army pay. Besides, six troopers died that morning—six, not counting Major Hanlon, the Finance Officer—and they were men I'd soldiered with. Then there's Lieutenant Warren . . . The court martial didn't only cashier him, Ed; it sent him to prison. He was my officer. I remember the day he came to Dubrow. He said, 'Sergeant, I'm new to the frontier . . . I'll need your help.' It takes a big man to say a thing like that."

"Rocklin, you're hard outside—but soft inside," said old Ed Webley.

"Maybe so," said Rocklin. "But I'm not soft when I think of men like Grierson and Brassard being behind such a dirty game." He eyed Webley narrowly. "Ed, last night you told me to head for Ambush House. Why? What did you think I'd find there?"

The old man said, "You know Big Lewt, who owns Ambush? Well, he's Sam Brassard's brother. And he's as crooked as a dog's hind leg!"

IV

ROCKLIN spent a week, and then another, deep in the rock hills—waiting for the hue and cry to die down. He had no way of knowing what sort of a search was being made for him; he could only guess that Len Grierson, a methodical man, would have patrols out searching. It was likely, too, that the United States marshal would have been called in. Of only one thing was Rocklin certain—Grierson and Brassard, and Big Lewt of Ambush House, could not afford to let him live. It was to be a case of a dead man telling no tales.

Rocklin had plenty of time to weigh things in his mind. Despite his early suspicions of Grierson, it had been difficult for him to believe that an officer would involve himself in such a risky business. Yet Rocklin knew something of Grierson's nature and private life; the officer was not a West Point officer, but a man who had come up from the ranks. But when he had put on an officer's uniform, Grierson had not rid himself of the ways of the barracks and the stables . . . He still secretly frequented the deadfalls—the saloons, gambling dives and honkytonks—of Lanassa, the rowdy frontier town nearest Fort Dubrow. Places other officers avoided. Like a trooper on payday, Grierson liked his liquor and his painted women and his back-room card games . . . Yes, Rocklin recalled a bit of gossip heard months ago. Barracks gossip. An officer from Dubrow had lost a thousand dollars in a card game one night, in the Outpost Saloon in Lanassa. The officer had been Captain Len Grierson. So Grierson squandered his part of the loot in one way, Brassard in another. And Big Lewt—?

With the two weeks of waiting over, Rocklin was impatient. He headed for Ambush House, and reached the rambling adobe place after darkness had closed down. He rode up to Ambush, almost sure he

was heading into a trap. He had stopped at Ambush House before, and knew there was no worse place in the Territory.

In a fashion, Ambush House was a historic place. It had been in the beginning a part of a Spanish *hacienda*—the home of a Spanish grandee of the old blood who had received a vast domain in a land grant from the Crown. The Spaniard, dust these hundred years and more, had lived for a time as a feudal lord. He brought in slave *Indios* from New Mexico, along with a ragtag army of Spanish-Mexicans to oversee them. He had futilely tried to cultivate the desert; he had had some success with cattle . . . But in the end he had died as many of his kind had died. The Apaches had come, raiding. The stout adobe walls of Ambush House held off those mounted warriors, but then the Apaches were joined by a big band of Utes. And the Utes were bushwhack Indians, expert in the art of ambuscade. The Spaniard and many of his soldiers had died, and the rest were driven off . . . From then on, the big adobe house and its outbuildings had been called Ambush House. Rocklin knew that much of history, but he did not know how Big Lewt Brassard, if Brassard was his name, came to own the place. Squatter's rights, perhaps.

A Mexican appeared from the shadows. "Your horses, Senor, have come far. My name is Sebastian. You hire me to be your *mozo de cuadra*—no?"

"You're hired," said Rocklin, dismounting and giving the man the reins. "Big Lewt?"

"Yonder, senor."

The Mexican pointed toward the main adobe building, and Rocklin turned that way. Laughing voices and the gay strumming of a guitar sounded from within. The wonder of Ambush House was the number of people always found there; it was a mystery how they found their way across the empty wastelands to the place. Rocklin settled the sixgun more easily in his waistband, then stepped into the big room that was like the barroom of any Mexican *cantina*. The atmosphere was laced with *tequila* and whiskey smells, of stale tobacco smoke, of sweating human bodies, of cheap perfume. Perhaps thirty men, Mexican and Yanquis, were gathered there—at the long bar and at the tables. There were half a dozen painted women in bright knee-length skirts. A card game was under way at a big round table in a corner. Big Lewt was behind the bar.

Most of the crowd looked at Rocklin, in a disinterested way. But Big Lewt smiled, and called out, "Welcome, friend—welcome to Ambush House." He quickly set out a bottle and glass. "Drink up."

Rocklin walked to the bar, convinced except for a mild suspicion that Big Lewt did not know him. It was possible, of course; he was in civilian clothes, and his other visits to Ambush House had been with a cavalry detail—a nameless trooper. And it might be that Big Lewt had not been warned by either Sam Brassard or Captain Grierson. Luck? Rocklin grasped at hope. He might learn something here.

"On the house," said Big Lewt, still smiling as Rocklin poured whiskey into the glass. "A traveler always rates a drink here."

"Thanks," said Rocklin. "Your health, friend."

He downed the drink and choked a little. The whiskey was green and raw. One of the percentage girls came to stand beside him, slipping her arm through his and smiling. She was blonde and rather pretty, and Rocklin thought, *It might have happened so to Lieutenant Warren—a drink and a girl.* It was a combination that might make even a straight-laced man stumble. Big Lewt, not smiling now, said, "Rita, let my friend be. He came here to talk." He looked blandly at Rocklin. And added, "Eh, Sergeant Rocklin?"

JOLTED, Rocklin was unaware of the girl moving off. He was known, and Big Lewt was forewarned. Looking at Big Lewt, he could see the resemblance between him and Sam Brassard. Brothers, certainly. The same bigness caused by fleshiness; the same small black eyes full of cunning. "So you know me," Rocklin said. "Yes, we'll talk."

"With me doing the talking, eh, friend?"

"A good idea, Lewt."

Big Lewt Brassard reached down and brought a bottle of brandy from under the bar. He uncorked it, lifted it to his lips, drank deeply. "French stuff," he

said apologetically. "Doesn't make me sick like rotgut whiskey does. Now what shall I say, Sergeant? The Apaches attacked the paymaster's detail five miles east of here. A sad thing . . . with good men dying. But then, soldiers are made to die. Take yourself, Sergeant. An old soldier like you knows—"

Rocklin managed a wry grin. "Somebody once said 'old soldiers never die,' Lewt. I'm an old soldier—maybe not by age, but by length of service. But go on—keep talking."

"Sure. I like to talk, Rocklin." Big Lewt was still bland, still sure of himself. "The survivors of the detail made their way back here. I did what I could for them. Doctored up the wounded. I even sent word to Fort Dubrow. Captain Grierson came out with a whole company. He commended me for what I'd done . . . A fine officier, Grierson. Too bad you don't hit it off with him, Rocklin."

"Lieutenant Warren was a fine officer, too," Rocklin said. "But it was claimed at the court martial that he was drunk when he and his detail left Ambush House. Was that true, Lewt?"

"Perhaps the lieutenant did drink a little during the night."

"The troopers, too?"

"I was their host," said Big Lewt Brassard. "The detail camped by Ambush House. I sent out food and drink—maybe a little too much *tequila,* eh?—and the girls . . . You know how girls like uniforms, Rocklin. Take Rita there, the girl who had her eye on you a minute ago. She fell for the lieutenant—"

"A damned lie, Lewt. Lieutenant Warren wasn't like that. He was in love with the daughter of Dubrow's surgeon. And another thing—Brad Warren might have taken one drink—to be sociable—but he would not have gotten drunk on detail. He wouldn't have permitted his men to drink. Then there was the Finance Officer, Major Hanlon—"

"A sporting man, if there ever was one, Rocklin," said Big Lewt.

Rocklin shook his head. "It doesn't hold out, somehow. Hanlon had a safe full of money to think about."

Big Lewt shook his ponderous head. "Rocklin, you are a hard man to talk to. You call me a liar, every word I say. I tell you, Lieutenant Warren did get drunk—"

He broke off his oily talk as Rocklin poured himself another drink. Rocklin was full of thirst; his mouth was cottony. He downed that second stiff drink, choked again, made a wry face. "That rotgut is worse than most, Lewt," he said. And his own voice sounded oddly. "Rotten taste."

Big Lewt said, "You must be off your feed, Sergeant. I'll have Rita rustle you up a meal. With grub under your belt and Rita smiling at you, you'll see things differently. Why, maybe you'll even believe that Lieutenant Warren was drunk as a lord that night!"

He motioned to the girl, and Rocklin saw her come smilingly toward him. He saw her in queer fashion, out of focus. The whole room—with its blue haze of tobacco smoke, it noisy crowd, its patterns of light and shadow—was crazily distorted. Rocklin blinked; he lifted a hand and rubbed his eyes. His vision was still blurry. Then he knew. As a heaviness lay upon his mind and his senses, Rocklin knew. He leaned against the bar to steady himself, for suddenly there were no bones in his legs. Big Lewt's fat face was grinning.

"You believe it, now, Sergeant?"

"That whiskey," said Rocklin. "It was drugged—"

HE BACKED a stumbling step, tried to pull the gun from his breeches. There was no strength in his arm; his hand was numb. The girl, Rita, lay a hand on his arm. "Come with Rita, amigo . . ."

Rocklin still tugged at the enormously heavy weapon. He wanted to lift that sixgun and fire a bullet into Big Lewt Brassard—for he had learned all that he needed to know. But he couldn't do it. Rita was laughingly turning him away from the bar, and he hadn't the strength to shake her off. He saw, once he was fully turned, a newcomer standing in the doorway—filling it with his great bulk. Rocklin's eyes were playing tricks on him, but he could see clearly enough still to recognize the San Mateo Indian agent—Sam Brassard.

The crowd now was aware that something queer was going on. And this motely

crowd at Big Lewt's Ambush House was as curious as any crowd anywhere. The wide room became hushed except for a low word here and there asking a question and the now whispering voice of the Mexican youth over his guitar. The hush lengthened but was broken by the sudden hysteria-touched laughter of one of the painted women . . .

Perhaps the scene in the *cantina* was amusing. *Rocklin looking like a drunk. The red-frocked girl, Rita, trying to coax him her way. Big Lewt, still behind the bar, grinning wolfishly. And there in the doorway another fat man, Sam Brassard, staring at Rocklin with dark eyes glittering with hate.* Amusing? No, there was something ugly in what was developing.

There were sounds outside. A Mexican wrangler cursing some mules he was readying for the now-due stage. A cock bird made a great squawking. From out on the desert came the hurried beat of hoofs and rumble of coach wheels—the Tulane stage swinging in toward Ambush House. Sam Brassard took a step forward, saying, "We've been waiting for you, Rocklin."

He took another step, and another, seeing Rocklin's helpless condition. Brassard grew bolder with each step; he began to grin in ugly fashion, perhaps remembering that night at the San Mateo agency. He waved his arm, gesturing Rita away from Rocklin. He took one more step, and was within arm reach of the drugged man.

"We knew you'd come here, Rocklin," Sam Brassard said, and struck out.

The blow caught Rocklin squarely in the mouth, and he fell back against the bar. He hung there, the bar alone holding him upright, and he began to bleed from the lower lip. Brassard came after him, hit him again in the face. The fat man relished this, for his grin broadened. He rammed a knee up, hard into Rocklin's groin. Rocklin was bent double. Brassard hit him at the base of the skull, and he at last sprawled to the floor. Brassard chuckled, and now began to boot the helpless man. The horrified Rita cried out in protest, and some of the crowd muttered. But no one stepped forward to stop the thing. Brassard's heavy boots kept slamming into Rocklin . . . Outside, the Tulane-bound stage came rolling in to a noisy halt.

V

PARADOXICALLY, Sam Brassard's blows and vicious kicks kept Jim Rocklin from sinking into the total effect of the drugged whiskey—and the nerve-dulling drug kept him from feeling the fullest degree of the merciless punishment. He lay helpless, yet not wholly unconscious. He was vaguely aware when Brassard stopped kicking him. Groping through the numbing haze in his mind, he knew too that the danger had passed—that something had occurred to end Sam Brassard's brutality short of murder.

Brassard had fallen back a step. At the bar, Big Lewt no longer grinned in that wolfish way. The horrified audience seemed to breathe with relief. The girl Rita was saying, "Thank Heaven—oh, thank Heaven!" in a hysterical fashion. Three people—passengers from the Tulane stage—had entered Ambush House. Two men and a girl, the one man in Army uniform and wearing a captain's bars. The other, an older man in nondescript civilian clothes, said flatly, "Brassard, that's enough." It was old Ed Webley, and he held a cocked sixgun in his hand—pointed at Sam Brassard's middle. "In fact," Ed Webley added, "it's plumb too much. You make one more move, mister, and I'll gut-shoot you."

Webley placed himself so that his back was to the wall. He showed yellowed teeth in a wolfish grin, and his eyes bored at Sam Brassard with a sharp bright look. His sixgun, an ancient Navy Colt, was as steady as his metallic gaze. It was clear that the old scout was ready and willing to kill. Not taking his eyes from Brassard, he said, "Look at the sergeant, Captain."

Rocklin lay flat on his back, spread-eagled. His great chest heaved as he labored for breath. He was battered and bloody, a pitiful sight. His dulled eyes groped for understanding. He heard a woman sobbing, and he realized dimly that it was not the percentage girl Rita. It was Nan Blair. Miraculously, it was Nan Blair. And the officer who now knelt beside him was Nan's father, Army surgeon Captain Jeffrey Blair.

Rocklin tried to speak. He was like a mute fighting for speech, and finally he blurted out, "Sir, I—am—not—drunk!"

Captain Blair loosened Rocklin's shirt and he lay a hand on Rocklin's chest to feel the beat of the heart. His lean face was frowning. He seemed bewildered. He took his deft fingers and held back Rocklin's eyelids so that he could examine the pupils of the eyes. "Odd," he muttered, thinking aloud. "Blamed odd."

Nan came to kneel, and she took Rocklin's right hand between her hands. She was pale and her eyes were wide and frightened. "Dad, his hands are ice-cold!" She bent over Rocklin. "Jim . . . Jim, what is it? Tell us what is wrong?"

"Not drunk . . ." Rocklin gasped.

"They've hurt you—beaten you!"

"Nan—" Rocklin willed his mind, his lips, to speak out. "Nan, I'm drugged!"

Myriad beads of sweat stood out on his battered face by the time he got out the needed word. And once he had spoken, the drug clamped its numbness upon his mind and he felt himself slipping away into blackness. He only dimly heard Nan, lovely Nan, cry out, "Dad, please—please do something."

Captain Blair did what he could, treating Rocklin for poison. He told Rita, "Fetch some warm soapy water. Hurry it up. I've got to get an antidote into this man."

Men from the crowd were willing to give a hand. On Captain Blair's orders, Rocklin was lifted and carried outside where he might have the pure air his lungs needed. He was laid upon a blanket somebody fetched. And Rita came finally with a kettle filled with water into which soap had been dissolved. Someone brought a lantern as Captain Blair helped—and forced—Jim Rocklin to drink down the gagging sudsy water that was to make him retchingly sick for a good many minutes . . . And while Rocklin was being purged of the drugged whiskey, old Ed Webley remained inside Ambush House with his sixgun aimed at Sam Brassard.

"If he doesn't pull through, Brassard," Ed Webley muttered, "you're going to die—even harder. You'd better pray, mister. Yep, you sure better say some prayers!"

LATER, Jim Rocklin was carried to an upstairs room and laid upon a bed. Big Lewt Brassard had followed, and now the fat man was squirming in his mind and trying to use words to convince Rocklin and Captain Blair that there had been a mistake made.

Lovely Nan Blair sat beside the bed; she was wiping Jim Rocklin's battered face with a wet cloth. The affrighted look was gone from her eyes. But she still was pale. When she smiled at Rocklin, it was an uncertain smile. She wanted to say something to Rocklin, but the heavy voice of Big Lewt kept her silent.

"Only knock-out drops, Captain," Big Lewt was saying. Now it was he who was sweating. His bulbous face had a grayish tinge. "I knew he was a deserter and wanted by the Army. I figured I'd return him to Fort Dubrow. But he came in with a gun, and he's the kind of hombre who'll use a gun."

Captain Blair said coldly, "First time I've known of you wanting to turn a man over to the authorities. You've hidden a hundred deserters here at Ambush House, during the past couple of years, along with more urgently wanted owlhooters. Why the change of heart, Lewt?"

"This Rocklin is a bad one," Big Lewt said. "A trouble-maker."

Rocklin was more himself than he had been for more than an hour. And he had had enough of talk. He saw his hat and sixgun on the table beside the bed, and now he reached out and took the weapon in his hand. Ignoring Nan's protest, he lifted himself on his elbow and cocked the sixgun as he levelled it at Big Lewt Brassard.

"We'll finish our talk now, Lewt," he said. "In my way."

The sweat trickled down Big Lewt's flabby face. It was possible that he never before had had a cocked gun pointed at him. It was more likely that the metallic hardness—the will to fire that sixgun—that lay in Rocklin's eyes was what loosened the fat man's tongue.

"So help me, Rocklin, I'm an honest man," he said, almost in a beggar's whine. "I didn't want any part of the scheme. But Sam drove me to it . . . He said it would be nothing at all. It was all fixed, he claimed. He and Captain Len Grierson had planned it. Grierson knew when the paymaster's detail would come to Fort Dubrow. He was in temporary command

of the post, because of the commanding officer's illness, and he mapped out the route the detail was to follow . . ."

"Go on, Lewt," Rocklin said.

Big Lewt moistened his lips. "Grierson gave orders to Lieutenant Warren to put into Ambush House if he cut sign of Apaches . . . The lieutenant did just that. Then I played my part of the business. I invited Lieutenant Warren and Major Hanlon in for a friendly drink and a meal. I sent a half-barrel of whiskey and some grub out to the troopers. That's all I had to do with it. I swear, Rocklin!"

He held out empty hands. "Could I help if the whole detail drank too much? Those soldiers could have turned down my whiskey . . . When the outfit broke camp that next morning, I was out of the scheme. I didn't know anything more until three, four hours later when some survivors got back here. They claimed the detail had run into an ambush. You see, Rocklin—you see?"

"Half the truth—damn you, Lewt!"

Rocklin got from the bed and, still weak, stood swaying. "You gave Lieutenant Warren and Major Hanlon a friendly drink, all right. But it was a doped drink, just as mine was tonight. You gave them enough of that drug so they'd sleep like dead men all night, then be dull-witted and sick in the morning when they'd need clear heads. Every trooper in that detail rode with a hangover that morning, Lewt. Your work—yours and Sam Brassard's and Captain Grierson's. You fixed it so that detail would be easy pickings for the Apaches. And thirty thousand dollars was the pay-off, with nobody to know that the Apaches hadn't done the job alone!"

He reached for his hat. His movements were awkward still, yet he got his sixgun steady. "I'm taking you to Fort Dubrow, Lewt—you and that tinhorn brother of yours. Captain, you lead the way."

Captain Blair turned to the doorway, but Big Lewt wouldn't budge. "Rocklin, you'll have to bargain with me," Big Lewt said. "I'll talk, I'll come clean and I'll help you hang Sam and that blackleg Grierson, providing you have the Army let me off easy."

"Bargain with the devil, Lewt?" Rocklin said. "Not me!"

He jabbed at Big Lewt's belly with his sixgun, and the fat man moved after Captain Blair. Rocklin followed close behind Big Lewt, and Nan walked with him. Nan touched Rocklin's arm.

"Jim, I had to come—after Ed Webley told me you wouldn't quit this thing," she whispered. "When two weeks passed without my hearing from you, I grew panicky. I made Dad bring me to this awful place."

"It's ended now, Nan."

"Yes, and I'm glad—very glad."

The four of them moved along a gloomy hallway and came to a steep flight of stairs that descended to the big barroom below. Captain Blair started down, with Big Lewt Brassard just behind him. Rocklin kept his eyes and his gun on Big Lewt. Below, the wide-eyed and bewildered crowd was watching the stairs. Across the room, old Ed Webley still stood with his back to the wall watching Sam Brassard. Halfway down, Big Lewt stumbled—perhaps accidentally, perhaps intentionally. He fell against Captain Blair, and the two men went spilling down the steps. Rocklin cursed. It was in him then to backshoot Lewt Brassard, but he dared not fire and risk hitting Captain Blair.

A COMMOTION broke out below. The watching crowd surged forward as though to help the fallen men. It was then too that Sam Brassard made his break. Jim Rocklin did not know exactly what happened. He saw too late that Sam Brassard had moved against Ed Webley, despite the old man's sixgun. Brassard had knocked Webley to the floor and now was plunging through the door—escaping. He was gone before Rocklin could bring his sixgun to bear.

Hurrying down, Rocklin jabbed at Big Lewt with his weapon. "Get up, damn you—get up," he raged. "I ought to kill you, you tricky tinhorn!"

Captain Blair had picked himself up. Big Lewt Brassard needed more prodding. When the fat man finally stood, he said savagely, "You've lost your game, Rocklin. Sam Brassard will never let you reach Dubrow!"

Rocklin prodded him again. "Keep moving, Lewt."

The motley crowd parted, so that the four could cross to the doorway. Captain

Blair helped Ed Webley to his feet. The old-timer had been hard hit; his eyes were dulled and there was blood trickling from his nose. He looked at Rocklin, and apologized, "I'm not the man I used to be, Jim."

"It's all right, Ed," Rocklin told him. "Go find a Mex called Sebastian. Tell him to fetch a wagon. We'll take Big Lewt in, and the Army can find Sam later."

Rocklin kept Big Lewt waiting there until Webley came, some minutes later, with a wagon and team. The Mexican, Sebastian, came leading Rocklin's two horses. Rocklin shoved Big Lewt out toward the wagon, and ordered, "Climb in, you!"

Big Lewt yelled, "Sam!" He screamed it, *"Sam!"*

Rocklin hit him. He crashed his six-gun's barrel down upon Big Lewt's head. The fat man fell to the ground. Rocklin kept on moving, away from the wagon, so that if there was gunfire he would draw it away from Nan and her father. He had taken but half a dozen quick steps when, from the deep shadow alongside an adobe hut opposite Ambush House, a gun flashed. Rocklin heard the gun's heavy blast and the vicious whine of its slug. He ran forward, firing his own weapon—firing once, twice, and a third time. A man screamed, a body fell noisily. Rocklin halted, waited, then called, "Sebastian, fetch a lantern."

A minute later, when lantern-light pushed back the darkness, Sam Brassard was dead.

IT WAS a hungry, trail-weary party that reached Fort Dubrow as darkness closed down the night following. Troopers came to stare as the wagon—with Ed Webley driving, with Captain Blair and his daughter and Big Lewt and a Mexican for passengers—rolled through the stockade gateway. They stared too at the horse-backer in civilian clothes, not recognizing him until one soldier, peering more closely, said, "Rocklin—that blamed deserter, Rocklin!"

Across the parade ground, in the doorway of headquarters building, Captain Len Grierson stood watching. Rocklin's flinty eyes had seen the officer the moment the party entered the post. He kept watching the man, whose tall figure was silhouetted by the lamplight from within the building. Now Grierson stepped forward, hesitated a moment, then swung to the left with long strides and was lost in the darkness.

Captain Blair was saying, "We'll discuss this matter with Major Hadley, at the infirmary." He stepped tiredly down from the wagon. "Rocklin, you will have to consider yourself under arrest—as a deserter—while this is worked out. Hand over your gun."

Rocklin handed over the weapon. He also handed the Mexican, Sebastian, two pieces of gold from the leather pouch in his pocket. His gaze was still searching the darkness across the parade ground, his mind upon Grierson. He could follow the workings of the officer's mind; Grierson would have guessed, on seeing Big Lewt a prisoner, that the game was up. His first and only thought would be of escape. *And he knows,* Rocklin thought, *about that loose plank in the stockade wall, back behind the stables.*

Captain Blair was already marching the sullen Lewt Brassard toward the infirmary, where the post commandant was abed with rheumatism. Nan too was going there. The curious crowd of troopers moved after the three. Rocklin dropped back. Now he cut sharply across the parade ground. He broke into a run, around B Company barracks. By the blacksmith shop, he saw three troopers idling—one of them stoning a saber. He heard his name exclaimed, saw the trio stare at him. He pulled up, saying, "Let me have this, Benson—" And he took the saber before the trooper could protest.

It was with the blade in his hand that Rocklin overtook Grierson, not within the post but outside the stockade wall. Grierson was moving at a run toward an Indian encampment along Broken Yoke Creek. *To get a horse,* Rocklin told himself. And drove himself faster.

Grierson heard the pursuit, but only when Rocklin was running him down. He whirled then, tugging the Navy Colt from his holster. Rocklin swung his saber as the pistol levelled and struck the flat of the blade down hard across Grierson's arm. The man grunted with anger and pain, and he lost his grip on the gun. It fell to the ground. Rocklin said, "Grierson, I'm taking you back."

Grierson shook his head. "I'll not be taken back." He drew his own blade from its scabbard, and braced himself to fight.

They were matched in size and strength, and their skill was a thing of training. The blades clashed viciously in sudden duel, and the two men strained one against the other. A wildness born of desperation drove Grierson and from the start he drove Rocklin back, step by step. The sabers rang as they met, as one parried the other, and they glinted dully in the gloom. Rocklin began to pant, to gasp for breath, and he was possessed of the wild fear that he could not hold out until Grierson gave him an opening. He was hard worn by all that had gone before, while Grierson was fresh. Even now, in his moment of alarm, Grierson's blade flashed in at him—and nicked him along the left ribs. The sudden flow of blood was warm against the sweated clamminess of his body.

Grinning now, Grierson forced the attack with even more zeal. His strokes were swift and expert, difficult to parry. Through his growing fear, Rocklin's mind recalled a maxim heard years before: *A man trained to the saber forgets that his blade has a point.* A point? Of course! A point to be used rapier fashion . . . Rocklin's heart leapt wildly as, back-stepping from a treacherous swing, he tripped over a loose rock. He fell to one knee as Grierson leapt forward to end it all. But Rocklin thrust forward with his blade, running the point through Grierson's sword arm. The man grunted, dropped his weapon, and his face was suddenly chalky in the gloom. Rocklin came erect and lifted his saber.

"Grierson, I am taking you back," he said, once more.

AN ANGRY Major Hadley left his sickbed to hold an inquiry that morning. A granite faced man, Hadley had donned his uniform and walked with the aid of a cane from the infirmary to headquarters building. He knew of what had happened, having heard the tangled story from Captain Blair. But he was a fair man, and he meant to give each person involved an opportunity to have his say. "An outrageous affair," he said flatly. "A shameful thing."

He sat at a table, with a lieutenant on each side of him to record what was said. The people who had had a hand in all that happened had been brought in by armed guards. They were now seated upon chairs arranged in a semi-circle facing the major's table. Jim Rocklin sat stiffly erect, once again wearing a uniform. His dark face was expressionless . . . Old Ed Webley sat on his right, Nan Blair on his left. Beyond Nan was her father, Captain Blair. Big Lewt Brassard sat beyond Ed Webley, and the fat man kept mopping sweat from his flabby face with a red bandana. Captain Len Grierson sat next to Big Lewt. The officer's saber-pierced arm was bandaged and in a sling. His darkly handsome face had turned gaunt, all in a night, and his eyes were dull and hopeless. Two sergeants with sidearms stood guard by the closed door.

"You, sergeant—" said Major Hadley.

Jim Rocklin snapped to his feet and stood at attention.

"Yes, sir?"

"You are under arrest for desertion," the officer said. "You were ill-advised enough to desert so that you could accuse certain men of an unbelievable crime. You went to the San Mateo Indian Agency and there assaulted Sam Brassard. Later, at Ambush House, you killed Sam Brassard in a gun-fight. You have brought Lewt Brassard—a civilian, mind you—here to Fort Dubrow as a prisoner. Last night, you assaulted an officer, Captain Grierson—and you brought him back to the post wounded." Major Hadley eyed Rocklin narrowly, coldly. "What do you have to say for yourself?"

"I deny none of the major's charges, sir," said Rocklin. "I did what I thought had to be done. It was not a thing a soldier could accomplish . . . So I made a civilian of myself."

"You accuse these two men of having a hand in the raid upon the Paymaster's detail, six months ago?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

"You have proof, sergeant?"

Rocklin nodded. "I have proof, sir. I have Big Lewt Brassard's confession of his part in what happened six months ago. I have witnesses to his confession—Captain Blair, for one, and Miss Blair, for another." He paused, then asked, "May I go on, sir?"

"You have the floor, sergeant."

"Thank you, sir," Rocklin said. "What I have done, is done—and I have no regrets. From the start, I never believed the truth had been told about that Apache ambush. . . . There was talk here and there, in the barracks and over in Lanassa town, that more than Apaches were in on that ambush. I listened."

"And you heard—what?" Major Hadley demanded.

"For one thing, sir," Rocklin replied, "I heard that shortly after the ambush, Captain Grierson paid off some gambling debts in Lanassa town. Then I heard about Sam Brassard taking himself a young wife—the daughter of a poor Mex sheepherder back in the hills. I heard how Brassard had fine house furnishings carted out from Tucson—and how he dressed his wife up like a fashionable lady. I didn't need to ask where the money came from. I knew. I deserted and went after Brassard—hoping to make him talk," Rocklin said. "I failed, because his wife sided with him. Then I was told to go to Ambush House."

Major Hadley nodded. "And at Ambush House, sergeant, you got a confession out of Lewt Brassard?"

"That's right, sir."

There was a sudden static quiet in the room, and it was broken only by scratching of two pens as the two lieutenants recorded what had been said. Lewt Brassard still was mopping at his fat face. Captain Grierson was staring at nothing. Major Hadley looked at Captain Blair.

"You heard Lewt Brassard's confession, Captain?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you, Miss Blair?"

"Yes, sir. He admitted his part in the ambush, but he blamed Sam Brassard and Captain Grierson." Nan spoke calmly.

Again there was silence. Then Major Hadley said, "I shall have to hold you, Lewt Brassard, and you, Captain Grierson, until I communicate with the judge advocate's office in Tucson. Do either of you wish to say anything at this time?"

"Only this, sir," said Grierson, rising. Some of his old arrogance returned, and he managed a thin smile. "I would prefer not to go through a court martial and be sentenced to hang . . ." He reached inside his tunic. "This will be an easier way out—"

Jim Rocklin saw the derringer as Grierson drew his hand from his tunic. Rocklin started forward, but even so he was too late. The derringer blasted, its slug tearing into Grierson. He collapsed.

IT WAS ANOTHER DAY. Big Lewt Brassard by then was on his way to prison, and another man—Lieutenant Brad Warren—had been released from Leavenworth.

Rocklin crossed the parade ground and called at the Blair house. Nan invited him into the parlor. She was prettily dressed and strangely breathless. She did not hide her excitement well. "So it is over at last, Jim," she said. "All over."

Rocklin nodded. He sat stiffly erect on a straight-backed chair, uncomfortable because this was an officer's house. And because of Nan seated across from him upon the sofa, charmingly posed with her billowy skirt spread out about her.

"I've been wondering what you now will do," Nan said. "There is that ranch I own . . . " There was high color in her cheeks, suddenly, and she was even more breathless than before. "It would be a fine place for you—for you and a wife."

"A wife?" said Rocklin, in astonishment.

"Oh, Jim! Don't make it harder for me than it already is!" Nan exclaimed. "Brad Warren and I—well, we have decided that what was between us was not wholly the thing that should be between a man and a woman. For Brad, there is a girl back East. For me—well, ever since that night you went over the stockade wall, you, Jim, have been in my thoughts. . . . "

Rocklin stared, disbelieving.

Finally he said, curtly, "An officer's daughter can't marry an enlisted man, Nan. There's Army tradition——"

"But," said Nan Blair, seeming shocked by her own boldness, "I'm asking you to become a rancher. Or would an old soldier like you—"

Jim Rocklin rose and crossed to Nan Blair, lifting her from the sofa. And he said, "Nan, Rocklin the rancher asks you to honor him by becoming his wife."

Soldier, deserter, rancher. . . . Jim Rocklin was adaptable.

One of them moved the fire nearer her feet.

Bullets Close The Deal

By FRANK BONHAM

She had no business setting up a trading post in this wild country, thought Yankee Jim Parker. She was a source of danger to all. But there wasn't a thing he could do, except—

ALONG THE Santa Fé Trail they called Jim Parker, "that Yankee." Not entirely because of his New Hampshire twang, but by virtue of a certain genius for hewing close to the line. A man had only to observe his eyes, as sharp as bits of New England sky, to know how he had acquired the name.

Commerce was his mistress. Behind those eyes his mind worked like the fingers of a counting-house apprentice.

In 1846, a man with Jim's talents and a little capital could make money on the Trail. Jim Parker had the talent, and his father had the capital. That was how the Yankee, who was hardly twenty-six, happened to be factoring the largest post south of Bent's.

The view from the block-house, on the north wall, was of scrub pine, *alamos,* and willow flanking Coyote Creek. This summer morning Jom had his father's old sea-glass to his eye; he could see the wagon-train winding past Vermilion Cliff, and he was mentally multiplying the number of horses and mules by four.

Fat Dutch John sat on a bench beneath the wall-loop. "How many do you make?" he wheezed.

The Yankee's voice exulted. "Better than a hundred wagons and caissons. It must be Barwell's Battalion. Say eighteen hundred animals. If we don't shoe five hundred dollars' worth, my name ain't Parker."

He was thinking that it would look good on the quarterly report he must send his father next month. He was thinking that this girl ten miles up Coyote Creek, this Charlie West, had not helped out the last report any. She was getting too much of their trade. Even a woman knew better than to set up a trading post within ten miles of another. They were bound to rob each other.

Charlie West. They said her real name was Charlene, but Heaven help the man who called her that. Jim had talked to her just once, and found her as hard-headed as she was attractive.

They went down an hour later and the Yankee had the big gates hauled open; with a certain flourish he put himself at the side. The train came on, the wagons first and afterward a long column of dragoons and foot-soldiers, a haphazard catch of the best and the worst of the country's manhood. They were farm boys, most of them, who had volunteered to serve their country against Mexico, but by the sorry look of them their enthusiasm had rubbed off with the first boot-soles they wore out west of Independence.

The colonel who led the column raised a hand in salute, a lean, graying man in dusty blues. Then he rode on. He rode past Parker's Fort rejecting it as though it were no more than a trapper's lean-to along the way.

For a moment Jim Parker was stunned. Before he recovered, the colonel had passed on and a double-line of tired infantrymen was slogging by. None of the men so much as looked at him. Jim stepped out to signal an officer jogging past beside his company.

"I beg your pardon, Captain."

The captain reined over to the gate. "I was wondering," Jim began, "whether the colonel realizes he is passing the last trading post north of Santa Fé—"

The officer's broad, brown face grinned, He had the appearance of a farmer who, by virtue of his bars, had become an officer and a gentleman, but whose speech had not been affected by his title. "Appears to me, feller," he said, "that yo're just about ten miles this side o' prosperity. We had all the animals shod at West's Fort, up the line. Likewise we replaced the things we was out of."

Jim was cold with fury; he felt pain, real pain, when he glanced down at the thick edges of the shoes on the captain's mount. He stepped back. "Thank you, Captain," he said crisply.

"Thing for you to do," said the captain, "is to j'in up. I can swear you in right now—" His glance passed with approval up and down the Yankee's long-coupled frame.

Jim Parker turned abruptly and went into the fort.

HE WENT OVER the situation with Dutch John that night. Dutch had trapped with Jim Clyman and Black Harris and the rest before asthma and obesity felled him. He knew what the trappers needed and would buy in this country; he understood which freighters were honest and which would sell you out. When the Yankee found him at Bent's Fort a year ago he had been glad to take a five-hundred-a-year clerk's job to help him set up and run Parker's Fort.

They were stirring times, and the flavor of them had stolen all the way out to this thousand-mile wilderness which America hardly realized she owned. Outfitters were

making fortunes in Fort Leavenworth and Independence, but there was hardly a place between the Missouri and Santa Fé where an army train could buy beef, beer, or bullets. It had looked like a sure-fire thing when Jim Parker came out here from New Hampshire. And now a girl trader was ruining him.

"If she were a man, I'd know how to deal with her," Jim told Dutch.

"If she was a man," Dutch said, "she'd have more honor than to set up this close to us."

"The point is," said the Yankee, "she has. And what are we going to do about it?"

"Talk to her ag'in. Maybe you can work out a pardnership or something."

"I'll have no partnership with a she-devil!" Jim Parker declared.

Dutch grinned, his fat face breaking into a spider-web of wrinkles. "Marry her, then! That's the only way a man can have the lastest word with one o' the varmints. When she's your squaw she'll be so busy raising your pups and feedin' you she won't have no time for nothing else."

Jim slammed the big ledger shut and stood up. "There was a time when I could get a bit of sense out of you," he declared. "Apparently you're into your senility now. Good-night."

HE SMOKED a pipe by his bedroom window. The wilderness was dark; the forest country west of the post was soundless. There was no pin-point of light in all that empty country reaching away north and west into the dead plains given over to heat and dust and massacre.

He thought of the men and boys marching into Texas and Mexico. Death lay ahead for many of them; death by bullet and disease. In the comforts he himself enjoyed he felt a scraping of guilt; he should be marching in that miserable column, too. But he told himself, as he had so often, that he was doing more right here, helping the army to get through, than he could as a dragoon or infantryman. The thought always comforted him. Yankee Jim Parker turned in and slept well.

Out here they pegged the passage of time, not by Sunday and holidays, but by the arrival of trappers, traders, and army units. On the calendar, Jim had it that his freight boss should be hauling in any day with new stores from the East. So he was pleased, but not surprised, when big Zeb Moffett rode in on his mule that morning.

The Yankee rubbed his hands. He took Moffett to the bar, where whiskey was set out. Moffett drank hugely and blew out his breath.

"Ah!" he said. "Cuts the dust, she do." Moffett wore the dirty buckskins of his trade, with much of the fringe cut away for whangs. He was close to fifty, swart, bald, powerful.

"Hard trip?" Jim Parker asked him.

"The boggiest spring and the driest summer I ever see."

There was some talk about the trail, but Jim Parker's mind was on the goods which had come down with Moffett in the slow-creaking ox-carts and freight wagons. He said finally, "I reckon the wagons will be in tonight?"

Moffett scratched his beard. "Why, no," he said. "Not unless you want to up the ante a bit, Yankee."

Ice began to form around Jim's heart. Moffet had gone to Independence armed with a letter of credit to buy the goods. The goods belonged to Parker's Fort—not to the freighter.

"It's like this." Moffett began thoughtfully to rub the top of the bar with his palm. "I'm in a hard trade, Yankee. I work for the money I make. Now, if another trader offers me more for the stuff I bring down than you, why shouldn't I take it?"

"But the goods don't belong to you!"

"Sho!" said Moffett. "But if I pay you back your money, then the goods is mine. And I can sell where I want . . ."

Jim Parker came up very straight, a lean young man with a good width of shoulder and a very flushed countenance. "Charlie West!" he said.

Moffet nodded. "I sold the stuff to Charlie for a ten per cent profit. Like they say about you, I'm a man that hews close to the line."

"A little too close this time!" Jim said. He threw his liquor in the freighter's face. When Zeb Moffett roared and struck out

at him, he ducked and plowed into him, his shoulder catching the man in the belly. Moffet stumbled back, gasping. The Yankee aimed a blow at his chin and nailed him solidly.

Moffett sat down, his eyes rolling stupidly. Freighters were supposed to be tough, but this lean trader struck as hard as he did fast. Jim called a couple of men. "Drag this carcass outside the gate," he directed. "Bring his saddlebags. There should be money in them."

There was. All of the Yankee's money, and some more, which he left. The fury in him began to solidify into purpose. It would be four months, at best, before he could replace the goods he had lost; unless Charlie West's trade blockade were broken he would not have enough stores to get by.

At noon he took the trail to West's Fort. He stared straight ahead, his long, spare body stiff on the saddle. He wore an embroidered deerskin shirt and buckskin pants, with the good New England boots his father manufactured in Lynn on his feet.

Three miles below the fort he heard a girl's cry, which broke off short. He reined in and sat very still, listening . . .

AROUND HIM was the heavy growth of the bosquet, cottonwoods and alders and gray-green shrubs. The land buckled into foothills a few hundred yards west; it was from this direction that the cry had come. Jim Parker walked his horse up the slope and dismounted near the top. He crawled to the crest, carrying his long rifle, to lie under a manzanita, again hearing sounds, and trying to place them.

Close to a piñon, part way down the slope, he discovered the source. Four Mexicans squatted on their heels around a woman staked out on the ground. A small fire burned near the girl's bare feet. Something in Jim Parker began to tremble when he saw the long blond hair against the reddish ground.

For a few seconds the Yankee could only lie on his belly, and shake. He was not a coward—this country sent the feeble-hearted home quickly—but he had never witnessed torture. He was worried about the odds, too. Four to one was not good.

His indecision dissolved when one of the Mexicans, with two sticks, moved the fire nearer the girl's feet. She screamed once, her body surging against the thongs that held her. The Mexican moved the fire back and spoke rapidly to her. And Jim Parker laid his arm out along the slope for steadiness, taking aim at the middle of the man's back. He knew that if he were steady enough the gun would do the rest; these Walker Model Colts had the faculty of obeying orders.

The gun roared, lifting his arm four inches off the ground. The Mexican came up on his knees, his back arching. The Yankee picked out another target. They were moving targets, now. One man was running for his horse and the others were flattening themselves out on the ground, trying to find their attacker.

Jim got a brown face in his sights. The gun kicked up a roll of dust, but when it cleared this man, too, was out of action. But now the bullets were coming Jim's way. One man had mounted and was aiming a long-barrelled rifle at him; the other, only a few feet from the girl, was holding a revolver in both hands, and he was looking straight at Jim.

Jim heard a ball rip the brush; it ricocheted a foot from his side to go whining over the ridge. The next shot threw dirt in his face and knocked his hat off. He was angry and breathless. He fired a shot which missed the prone man; the second one found him. When he swung the Colt to find the horseman, he saw the Mexican loping into the scrub forest.

He loaded the warm chambers of his gun and waited a few minutes longer. Then he went down and disarmed the dead man and stood above the girl. It was Charlie West.

She just looked up at him, white as flour-dough, but still pretty. She had large, dark eyes and the full lower lip which makes a man think of warm kisses. The Yankee was not too shaken to notice the strong young figure under the light doeskin blouse and skirt.

He knelt and inspected her feet; the soles were red but not blistered. Charlie West exploded into voice.

"Yes, it's human, Yankee! Now, untie it and find out whether it goes around on two feet or four!"

Jim Parker cut her loose. Charlie West

began to brush herself off. "Mussed me up some, the devils." She confronted him with a somewhat more composed demeanor. "Reckon I don't seem very grateful, Yankee. Well, I don't take kindly to being staked out, and it upset me some. Thanks for what you did."

"A woman," declared Jim, "has no business roaming around outside the walls by herself."

"I can take care of myself," Charlie West snapped. "Generally speaking," she added. "I was hunting my milk cow. Some ignoramous let her stray off."

"Maybe Zeb Moffett stole her. You can't trust the man," Jim said.

Charlie West grinned devilishly. She said, "I'll have to ride one of those Mexican plugs till I find mine. They jumped me over by the creek."

JIM caught one of the scrubby mountain ponies for her and they started toward West's Fort. He was still shaken by what he had been through. "I didn't know Mexicans were much for Indian tricks," he said. "It—it was horrible."

"They aren't," Charlie said. "These wanted information. They were trying to find out how much powder and shot I have in the post." She laughed. "I told them I had a thousand pounds of each, just to make them happy. But they didn't believe me; they kept after me. They were mighty determined."

Jim's lips pressed together in disapproval. "You were foolish. You should have told them some small reasonable figure. You may have drawn an attack down on yourself."

Charlie Parker's laugh had carelessness in it. They approached the brown walls of the post on the bank of Coyote Creek. The gate opened, and a man in greasy buckskins, his head large and red-thatched, ran out. From his previous visit to the post, Jim recognized Red Mike Fisher, the girl's factor.

"Charlie, you witch!" he exploded. "Will you ever learn to tell us when you're goin' out? Another hour and I'd 'a gone out hunting you."

"Another hour would have been too late." The girl told him about the Mexicans. Fisher's close stare came to Jim Parker; he was a heavy-limbed, big-jawed man with a nose that was flattened from having been broken.

He said, "Thanks, Parker. For a Yankee, you're *mucho hombre.*"

They went into the large main building, Jim Parker inquiring, "What's the matter with Yankees, Fisher? I see hundreds of them going down the trail every month to fight for us."

Charlie West could put scorn into her eyes and lips. "That's right, Jim. Sometimes I wonder why a young buck like you don't get on the bandwagon, too."

Jim's eyes took a hostile glaze. "I fancy I'm doing more by helping those troops to get to the battlefields than I could any other way," he stated.

Fisher winked at the girl, grinning with a double-line of discolored teeth. "Don't seem to me," he ventured, "that you're doing so much of that, either."

"That," said Jim, "is what I came to talk about. Can we sit down somewhere?"

Within the main trading room were the odors Jim Parker loved best—the odors of commerce; of hams hanging from smoky *vigas,* and kegs of wine; of hides and coffee and bolts of cloth. He saw a group of trappers with blue bandanas about their heads, stony-faced, silent men who inspected a crate of beaver traps one by one. The girl led the way to a table in back, off the kitchen.

"In the first place," Jim began, "I want to know what kind of ethics you go by, to rob a man of a wagon-train of goods."

"Rob?" smiled Charlie. "I paid good, hard gold."

Jim pounded the table. "Nevertheless, I need those stores to get through till winter. It—it's piracy!"

"No," Charlie said, "it's business. Moffett told me you held him to such a figure he couldn't make any profit. He said he'd sell the stuff to me unless you wanted to raise your price. Apparently you didn't."

"Why should I?" the Yankee demanded. "The stuff was mine. It was as downright dishonest as your settling here to cut me off."

The girl had a stubborn chin that could set as hard as a man's. "It's not my lookout what my neighbor does or where he does it," she told the Yankee. "I picked this spot because it catches the trains just after they ford Coyote Creek. They're

ready to settle down for the night—and do a little buying. Somebody was bound to set up here, sooner or later. I'm in a man's business, Yankee, and I've got to act like a man. My folks have been traders, clear back. Texas got too crowded for me and I moved out here, lock, stock and barrel. And I reckon I'll stay."

What Jim Parker had to say next came like a fish-hook pulled out of his thumb. He had his pride, but he was helpless.

"Maybe," he said, "a partnership would interest you."

Red Mike Fisher let a loud laugh out of his big mouth. "Me and Charlie are pardners," he declared. "I got the savvy and she's got the money. There ain't room for a third."

There was suddenly a change in Charlie West's eyes; a softening, Jim thought—as though deep within her she did not like this gouge-eye combat which was a man's business. But as he stood up she gave no sign.

"Mike's right," she said. "No partnership. If that's all, I'll be washing up to get the smell of those greasers off me."

Jim Parker did not answer. He went to the door, Fisher swaggering beside him.

"Yes, sir," Fisher said, "Charlie's tough. Her old man and maw was massacred on the way from Texas, but the gal come through with just enough men left to make it in. You can see what you're up ag'in. A fighter, gal or devil."

Jim Parker rode away, thinking that a girl with eyes like Charlie West's, eyes that thinly screened something sensitive, must have a softness somewhere . . .

Down at Parker's Fort, in the days that followed, it became downright lonesome. Trappers drifted in now and again, for they followed no trails but their own. They were the only customers. The stone safe sunk in the floor had been scooped almost empty. Forty men to be paid every month, and nothing coming in. Soon Jim would have to send home for money—or quit.

ON AN EVENING three weeks after the talk with Charlie West, a troop of dragoons rode up from Santa Fé. They rode into the gate, thirty men commanded by the same captain to whom Jim had spoken when Barwell's Battalion passed a month before. He gave his men the order to dismount and tend their horses.

He went into the interior and accepted a glass of spruce beer. This time he introduced himself as Captain Fannin. He seemed more taciturn than when he had been by before; there was less humor in his mouth and a brusqueness in his manner.

"I see you're riding north," the Yankee mentioned. "You don't mean the war is over already?"

"Not hardly." The dragoon wiped his lips with the back of his hand. "Them greasers gave up Santy Fee easy enough, but they're still hornin' around the hills. Guerrillas; thousands of 'em! There's a band somewhere in these hills. My information is that they're a raiding party after supplies. I'll be needing a guide tomorrow."

"I know the ground fairly well," said Jim.

Captain Fannin grunted acceptance. He said, "I reckon you know you aren't in what would be called a safe spot here. A good-sized party of greasers could take this fort in an hour. They've got cannon; we know that."

"I've got some able-bodied mountain men. They can shoot like fools."

"They wouldn't be much against a couple of six-pounders and a hundred rifles. For the time being, I'd recommend you and Charlie West throwing in together. Your post is stouter. Maybe you can persuade her to move down for a spell."

The Yankee said, "Hah!" But that night in his room he did some serious thinking. To himself, least of all, he would not admit that Charlie West had any attraction for him. She was a harridan, an amazon. But he knew she was more than that; there was a horizon in her that perhaps no man would ever discover. There was a reason she behaved as she did. Jim sensed its existence as a challenge. And he was worried about her after the talk with the captain. His skin roughened when he imagined her in the hands of a pack of woman-hungry Mexicans . . .

He found quill and ink and wrote her a note. "Captain Fannin, of the United States Dragoons, suggests that we combine

our forces here at Parker's Fort for a short time, until the guerrilla menace is removed. I should be glad to provide space for you, your men, and your stores. J. Parker."

He sent it off by a rider and had his answer before midnight. "Yankee: We've got gates, guns and guts. Thanks just the same. C. West."

Jim Parker threw the note in the fireplace and lay down on his bed. But the hollow-eyed specter of sleeplessness sat by his bed that night.

In the three days that followed he learned that the guerrillas were no myth. He looked at the ashes of recent campfires and saw danger to this whole lightly-held country. On the third night they knew they were not far behind the Mexicans. They had ridden a crazy, switch-backing course all over the mountains and were now back again, only fifteen miles from Coyote Creek.

Captain Fannin inspected the old camp. He said, "Sixty men." He sat cross-legged against a log and, with lips pushed out, traced the words of his report on a tablet. He looked up a half-hour later at Jim. "Can you write?" he asked.

Jim nodded. "Write and figure," he said. He did not add that at Dixwell's, in Cambridge, he had also learned Latin and Greek and some other things which were of little use against Mexicans.

The captain grunted. "Like to talk you into ji'ning up as my adjutant," he remarked. "I'll get you a lieutenancy."

"I reckon not," Jim said. He had been all over the question and knew what he was doing.

In the morning he told the captain he must start back. He could be gone no longer from the post.

"Tell you what you do," said the captain. "Signal me if you get a line on the varmints. Smoke signals by day, fire at night."

Jim rode away. He was only a mile from West's Fort when he saw the Mexicans.

A lot of good ideas immediately went helter-skelter through Yankee Jim's head, and vanished. It would take more than ideas to turn aside the several score Mexicans filtering silently through the trees. Nothing as flimsy as an adobe wall could stop a ball from the brass cannon that went with them in a cart.

There was nothing he could do but try to reach the fort ahead of them. They were riding slowly, spread out in a thin forage line; the chance of making it was good. Once he was in the bosquet of the creek he hit a hard lope. He glanced behind him and saw flashes of color in the trees. So he had been seen. The attack was on, and he was only a few hundred yards ahead of the spearhead.

When the fort loomed before him he began to yell. He drew his Colt and fired two shots. Up in the blockhouse window he saw a guard's face. A moment later the gate opened, and Charlie and Red Mike Fisher watched him ride in and jump from his pony.

Jim was shouting, "Guerrillas! An army of them! Get your men on the walls."

Charlie went white, but the effect on Red Mike Fisher was strange. His big arm caught Charlie by the wrist as she started for the main building. "No, ma'am," he said. "We ain't going to do that a-tall."

Charlie said, "Mike! What's the matter with you?"

The factor pointed through the gate. "Why, jest look out there."

Jim turned, and in that moment Fisher brought his fist against the back of Jim's head, and he went down with his senses sinking into a whirling, bright sea—

Through the gate rode many men. A girl screamed, and screamed again, and shots rang out for a while and then silence came. Silence, and the night. Jim Parker awoke in the big trading room, lashed to a chair.

AGAIN it was the odors of the room which caught his notice, but they had altered. The good fragrance of merchandise was overlarded with the stench of sweat, of evil-smelling Mexican leather. The room was packed with Mexicans—dark, brawling men at their food. Charlie West sat at a long main table with Red Mike Fisher and a Mexican festooned with braid and brass—the only uniformed man in the room.

Fisher was drunk. He had his arm around Charlie and now and then he would

yank her close and kiss her full on the mouth. The girl did not fight him. Finally Fisher saw that Jim's eyes were open. He filled a cup with red wine and brought it to him.

"Likely," he said, "you need a stimulant. Try this."

He held the cup to Jim's lips, but when Jim tried to drink he threw it in his face. "If there's anything else you want," he grinned, "ask Red Mike. Red Mike Fisher's the boss around here."

Charlie had come behind him. She said, "You were right, Yankee. But I didn't count on having a cur dog to reckon with." She was trembling; he could see fear in her eyes as plain as bold-face print.

Fisher scowled. "You'd 'a done the same to me. In this country a man makes a dollar as he can. So I'm boss, now, and you're part o' my goods. One day I'll sell out and we'll travel on. I'm putting my chips behind Mexico in this ruckus."

Jim closed his eyes, shutting out the obscene face that filled him with hate. He had to think . . . He opened them again and again, "Do we have to freeze to death in here? If I've got to sit here, I'd like to be warm."

Fisher's eyes blinked. The fall evenings were already crisp, and with the doors opening and closing continually the request was not out of line. "Why not?" he said.

He had a fire built on the large mud hearth behind Jim. The Yankee said softly, to Charlie, "If you've got pine chips, dump them on. And tallow. I want a real fire."

Fisher went back to the table, but kept his eye on the pair. "I don't understand," Charlie said. "It's not that cold."

Jim repeated, "I want a real fire!"

She threw on a few scuttles of resin-soaked chips. The flames leaped up, a surging red mass that crowded up the flue. Where Jim sat it was hot. He felt the heat like a flat-iron laid against his buckskins. Charlie sat a little distance from him.

Suddenly she said, "I — I'm scared, Jim."

Jim smiled. "Charlie West scared? Why, Charlie has more salt than any ten men north of Santa Fé." But he knew she was the one who spoke straight; that the softness he had sensed in her once before was coming out. It was coming through a thin armor of determination she had wrought around herself.

Her eyes were upon him, but he knew she was seeing something beyond him. "I've been frightened ever since I came out here," she said, and her voice was dry, tired. "When I close my eyes I always see the Indians—"

"Indians?" Jim frowned; and then he remembered what Fisher had told him: *Her old man and maw were massacred on the way from Texas, but she come through alive. She's tough, that gal . . .*

"The Kaws," Charlie said. "They attacked us at dawn, before the oxen were yoked, even. They tied me to a wagon wheel and made me watch while they stripped the flesh—" She began to sob, covering her face with her hands. "And—and then before they were though a bunch of trappers rode in and saved a few of us—"

JIM PARKER was a discerning man. A lot of things were suddenly plain to him. "But you had the courage to come on," he said. "And then you built your fort close to mine because you'd feel more secure—"

Charlie nodded, her cheeks wet. "What are we going to do, Jim?"

"Let's have some more fire," he said.

Charlie was past reasoning; she piled the hearth high with golden pine chips that caught like sperm-oil. So for an hour the fire bellowed up the mud chimney, while every man in the room sweated, already hot with wine.

Suddenly a Mexican appeared in the doorway, shouting: *"Coronel! El fuego* —the fire stands up from the chimney like a tree! I fear the sparks on the roof—"

Red Mike Fisher slowly stood up. All at a stroke, he understood why the Yankee wanted a fire. He brought an axe and caved in the head of a small wine-cask. He rushed to the fireplace and dumped the wine over the fire. Steam billowed from the hearth, choking Jim. Fisher loomed over Charlie a moment. Roughly he struck her across the mouth with the back of his hand. "You cheating little—!"

He called the Mexican leader. "Have

the Yankee strung up to a wagon wheel. I reckon the gal could go for a little show . . . I know some tricks about cuttin' face muscles so they all run down to a puddle."

Charlie screamed as they seized her, and Jim Parker closed his eyes and waited. They carried him into the dark yard and hung a lantern from a cleat on the side of the wagon while he was stripped to the waist and spread-eagled. The *coronel* held Charlie West so that she must watch as Fisher stropped a Green River knife.

Fisher came close and began to probe Jim's cheeks with a forefinger. Jim said quietly, "I'm going to suggest that they call you Yellow Mike Fisher."

There was a commotion as Charlie West broke from the Mexican's hold and ran at Mike Fisher. Fisher swung to capture the girl, but just then a bugle sent its imperative cry through the yard. The gates swung open, and Captain Fannin's dragoons began to stream into the post.

Smoke by day; fire by night. The captain had not forgotten the signal.

Red Mike Fisher was the first to go down. Rifles had been left in the building; the Mexicans had only revolvers and knives. Among them the Missourians rode with sabers slashing right and left. Like prairie wolves, the drunken guerrillals were herded into corners and cut down or captured.

IN THE MORNING, Jim Parker sat a long time on a bench, watching the dragoons make ready for the long ride back. A great many thoughts occupied him; some regrets, some satisfactions. He sighed.

He remembered how he had found Charlie in his arms after they cut him down; how natural it had seemed, how swiftly the change in Charlie had been completed, from amazon to woman. And now, with all his troubles ironed out and an extra sweetness in his cup, there was this rasping of his conscience to battle, until he knew he could stand it no longer.

When Charlie came downstairs from her long sleep she sat beside him on the bench. "I'll be having the stuff moved today," she said. "Now that we have an understanding, it's best not to dally."

Jim made marks in the dirt with his boot-toe. "You'll come down," he said, "but I won't be staying. Captain Fannin needs an adjutant who can read and write. Such men are scarce. I can't be denying my duty any longer. Will you be frightened, without me?"

"I—I won't like it, much," Charlie admitted. "But you'll be back. Please tell me you will."

Jim pulled her head down on his shoulder, and sighed. It was strange how this girl's fears stirred up emotions in him which were rusty with disuse. He was still a man who liked a bargain; what Yankee wasn't? But he reckoned you couldn't do much better than to convince a girl she had to have you, when you were the one with the real need. It was sharp trading; but Charlie seemed to like it.

By Torch and Tomahawk

Old England and young America fought grimly for this new territory—the Indian a mere weapon in the deadly struggle . . . Jared Crandall alone knew that that weapon had come alive by itself—was a spear thrusting at the very heart of the New World . . . yet he had made a certain promise to Black Hawk!

THERE WAS TENSION in Saukenuk, tension and uncertainty. Jared Crandall had sensed it the moment he entered this village of the Sacs. Warriors squatted before the huts, moved around the streets, always drawn to the council house where war or peace would be decided.

Eastward, Jared knew, the war would be fought with a certain adherence to the

Jared grabbed the horse's muzzle. Marta sucked in her breath . . .

A Novel of Treachery—and Revenge

By LEE E. WELLS

rules of the game. But on the Northwestern Frontier, regulations would go by the board. Unless the Indians could be kept peaceful, murder, rapine and pillage would sweep the whole area from Ohio westward to St. Louis. Black Hawk and Keokuk, chiefs of the Sacs, were the twin keys to the problem.

Through the door of the pole and bark hut where he was quartered, Jared could watch the warriors as they argued among themselves. He sat cross-legged on the dirt floor, cleaning his long rifle, full, brown eyes missing nothing. A shadow darkened the doorway and a man came in. Jared arose, tall and lean in his buckskins, almost dwarfing the other man. His angular face showed instant suspicion.

"Ye'd be in the wrong place, Mart Killen."

"Mayhap," Killen answered. He was of medium height with broad and powerful shoulders. He wore a round, shallow black hat almost like a Quaker's. Thick thumb and forefinger tugged at a full underlip as he looked up at Jared from under shaggy brows.

"Would ye consider a talk?" he asked.

"I'd consider one, though it'd be a waste of time," Jared answered. He placed the long rifle in a corner, shifted knife and tomahawk in his wide leather belt. He made

a gesture with his long arm to the bare, packed floor. Mart Killen grinned and hunkered down. Neither man said anything.

Killen continued to pull at his underlip. Lank hair hung down from under the hat, framing his wide, moon face. He had a broad nose, bulbous at tip and wide at root so that his muddy eyes were set well apart. His buckskin shirt shone with layers of ancient grease. A heavy sheath knife rested at one broad hip. He jerked his hand from his lips and spoke abruptly, his voice husky.

"For three years now we've been fighting for the Injun trade, and now we're both in Saukenuk for contrary purposes. Lumme, but it looks like we'd be always ag'in one another."

"You've come from Malden and the British," Jared stated flatly. His voice was full and deep pitched. His wide lips seemed hardly to move. Killen nodded and stabbed a thick finger at Jared.

"Like ye come from St. Louis and the American commandant. Ye have a job and so have I. We'd pull the Sacs two ways. They'll go but one and ye'll have your trouble for nothing."

"I?" Jared's brows rose. His firm lips broke in a grin that seemed to light his darkly tanned face. "Now that's to be seen, Killen."

KILLEN hunched forward. "Crandall, ye're young and ye'd not be making much from this trip. I can tell ye now that the Sacs will fight and they'll fight for the King. Ye can bank on that."

"Your tricks?"

"Mayhap. Mart Killen gets what he's after. Now ye'd save me a bit of trouble was ye to leave Saukenuk. Ye figure Keokuk will back ye—and so he will. But Black Hawk swings the power with the Sacs and in the end ye lose. For the sake of days saved in useless argument, I'll see ye gain by returning to St. Louis."

"That smells mightily of bribe," Jared said, leaning forward, his fist clenched on his knee. Killen shrugged deeply.

"Call it what ye will. The Sacs throw in with the King, I can tell ye that. Ye can report it now or later to the commandant at St. Louis and it all amounts to the same. Ye leave now and ye have something to show for your trouble. Leave later, and ye'll have neither peace nor coin."

Jared's nostrils flared and he had to swallow hard two or three times to choke down his anger. Mart Killen deserved a fist planted squarely in the center of his face. For three years now, this trader from Malden had used sly trickery and underhand methods to gain the Indian trade at Jared's expense. Now he proposed to use the same tricky ways of swinging the Sacs to the British. Bribery this time and an insult to a man who loved his country.

But Jared dared make no open move yet. Too many of the Sacs were undecided and Mart Killen knew it. If Jared broke the peace of the village, Black Hawk would have him sent packing. Keokuk would be helpless because of tribal custom. Jared slowly arose.

"Ye picked the wrong bucko for that, Killen. I don't buy and I don't sell my country."

"Country!" Killen growled and sniffed contemptuously. "It's a land of rebels that the King's Navy and troops will easily subdue. Ye're a fool, Crandall. I'll not make the offer again."

"Make it again," Jarred answered quietly, "and I'll smash your teeth down your throat."

Killen arose, his thick legs bringing him erect with amazing speed. He glared at Jared, hand gripping the knife hilt so that his knuckles showed white. Jared waited, unflinching. He half hoped that Killen might draw the blade. Black Hawk would evict Killen as swiftly as anyone else for infraction of custom.

"We'll settle this between us later," Killen said through set teeth. "There's the whole of the Illinois wilderness beyond the corn fields of Saukenuk and I daresay ye can be found."

"No need to search," Jared snapped. "Set the time and the place and I'll be there."

Killen stared hard at him, then spun on his heel and strode out the door. For several minutes after he had left, Jared stood tall and straight, fists clenched at his side. At last he expelled his breath in a sigh and once more picked up the long rifle. His fingers rubbed along the smooth metal of the barrel and a look of longing came in his eyes.

Someday Mart Killen would find that his tricky ways would not help him. When

that day came — Jared broke off his thoughts and resumed cleaning his rifle.

That night the council fire blazed high on the hard-packed quadrangle before the chief's hut. Jared Crandall sat cross-legged beside Keokuk. Beyond him were several sub-chiefs and then Black Hawk's sharp, proud visage gleamed in the firelight. Mart Killen sat almost opposite Jared beyond the fire. In a packed, silent ring stood the Sac warriors. Jared's eyes slowly circled them, a proud band of fighting men. The Sacs themselves could cause the small American posts along the Mississippi frontier a great deal of trouble. But, if they threw in with the British, then the Winnebago were almost certain to take up the war trail.

The council started with slow Indian solemnity. The pipe came around the circle, each man taking a short puff and passing it on. Keokuk handed the pipe to Jared, pausing a moment, giving Jared a deep significant glance with his startling blue eyes. The eyes and the swift, sharp tongue marked Keokuk's French blood. Jared in turn puffed on the medicine pipe and it completed the circle.

Black Hawk arose and there was a soft murmur around the fire. The chief had a long pointed face, made more gaunt by the shaved poll and the high-standing topknot. A thin line of eyebrows arched high in sharp angles, beneath which the narrowed black eyes glittered. Below the high cheek bones the coppery skin was drawn tight, bringing the Roman nose into greater prominence. His lips were slightly pursed, held close together. Large ears protruded from the shaven head like a gargoyle's. Black Hawk appeared to be a man who had found life none too pleasant and who trusted no man but himself.

"The Father-King beyond the waters," he said in clipped, harsh accents, "has asked the help of his brothers, the Sacs and the Foxes. The Father-King has ever been kind to his brothers, treating them fairly in trade, leaving their lands to their own use. Now the King asks us for help in a great war that he fights."

BLACK HAWK'S supple figure drew up straighter. Forty-five years old, he looked even younger than Keokuk who was thirteen years his junior. Black Hawk's hand struck his chest and then his long arm swept out in a wide circle.

"Black Hawk has seen the Americans. Black Hawk has had word from the White Father in Washington, who speaks soft but with a crooked tongue. The land of the Sacs is theirs, given by the Great Manitou and by the bravery of the Sacs. But the Americans want it. They will take it. It is their way."

"That is not so," Keokuk came to his feet. He was shorter than Black Hawk but there was a vibrant quality in him that Black Hawk would never have. His blue eyes cut around the circle of grim, silent Indians.

"Keokuk sees what is in Black Hawk's heart. He wants war with the Americans. Black Hawk believes honor, glory and many scalps lay along that trail. Black Hawk sees darkly. There will be only death and the squaws will wail for the warriors who are gone, our villages that will be burned, our corn that will be destroyed. Keokuk knows that if the Sacs are true to the White Father in Washington, he will make secure the Sacs lands and the Sac villages. He has spoken and Keokuk believes."

Black Hawk's pursed lips broke in a crooked half-smile and his brows arched high. "Who has whispered so in Keokuk's ears?"

"I have," Jared arose slowly and he didn't miss the surpressed growl that swept back from the fire into the outer darkness. "I have come to the Sacs from St. Louis. The American war chief there sends peace and the hope of the peace to the Sacs and the Foxes. He asks them to remember the treaty they made eight years ago with the Americans. We have lived with the Sacs by that treaty and in friendship. We ask the Sacs to live with us."

"Treaty!" Black Hawk fairly spat the word. His eyes narrowed to pinpoints and glittered balefully. "Five Sac warriors were forced to place their marks for the whole tribe. They were not great men of the tribe, they had no authority. But the White Father with his warriors forced us to give up land or lose our lives and our towns. Treaty!"

Mart Killen arose from the other side of the fire. Jared could think of no suitable reply to Black Hawk's accusation. The

treaty had been rammed down the throat of the Sacs by an over-zealous general, eager to seize more Indian lands and open them for settlement. Killen saw Jared's confusion and his thick lips smiled in broad triumph. His throaty voice carried clearly.

"The Father-King across the water has never stolen land from his brothers, the Sacs and the Foxes, nor the Winnebago, the Miami, the Piankeshaw or the Huron. His traders have treated you fairly even as I have done. Has any British trader cheated you in cloth, powder, blanket or musket? No! But from the Americans you get smooth words and evil firewater, powder that is nothing but black sand, cloth that is not up to measure."

"Not from me!" Jared answered hotly. Killen nodded.

"Nay, not from you, but from the other American traders. Black Hawk and the Sacs know. Now the Father-King needs your help. He is attacked by the Americans, who used a forked tongue and smooth words even as they prepared for war."

"You can have my answer now!" Black Hawk answered and he snatched his tomahawk from his belt, holding it high. Keokuk instantly held up his hands.

"Wait. Think! You take the wrong path!"

"I ask the Sac to take the warpath for the Father-King," Killen shouted. He pointed his finger at Jared. "Let the Sac deny his crooked tongue. Send him back to St. Louis with the challenge of the Sacs and Foxes. Your brothers, the Winnebago, will join you, even as the Miami and the Shawnee to the east."

Black Hawk's arm lashed back and the hatchet whizzed through the air. It struck a high, thick post, set deep in the ground just beyond the fire, the blade sinking deep, the handle quivering.

"War! Send the challenge to St. Louis!"

Instantly a dozen other hatchets buried themselves in the post. Warriors yelled until it seemed the very stars would tremble. They surged forward and their lances shook high over their heads as they started a grotesque war dance around the thick post. Jared glanced at Keokuk who still held his hands high, vainly trying to stem the rush of the warriors. Jared shrugged slightly and turned away toward his hut.

He had failed and he couldn't altogether blame himself. There had been too much trickery of the Indians in the past and this had swayed Black Hawk to war. Jared entered his hut, the pounding beat of the war dance making a threatening rhythm in his ears. Mart Killen had won and he would take every advantage of it. Jared rolled up in his blanket and finally drifted off to sleep, the beat of the war dance still pounding in his ears.

II

JARED AWOKE at dawn and was ready for the return journey to St. Louis within an hour. There was no longer uncertainty in Saukenuk. Time and again warriors paused before Jared's hut and frowned angrily within the door. Jared apparently paid no attention to them but he knew they would attack him in a moment if it were not for Black Hawk.

He had just finished his pack and straightened when Keokuk came in the hut. The Indian's face was set in hard and grim lines. He sank down on the floor, Indian fashion and looked up at Jared, the blue eyes clouded.

"I cannot change Black Hawk. I have tried. He leads the Sacs to destruction. Black Hawk goes to Malden to accept the British offer."

"And you?" Jared asked.

"There are some who have not lost their heads. They go with me across the Mississippi where there will be no chance of war."

"You're smart, Keokuk."

Both men turned as Mart Killen appeared in the doorway. Three or four armed Indians pressed close behind him. Mart's muddy eyes dropped to Jared's pack, lifted mockingly.

"Now ye'd be ready to travel. Ye'll come with me, Crandall. Ye have a place in the King's prison at Malden."

"Whose orders?" Jared blurted. Killen jerked his thumb to his own wide chest.

"Mine, I reckon. Ye'd be no trouble to me there and Black Hawk will get a heap more credit bringing ye in. Not that ye'll go with Black Hawk. I aim to travel fast and quick by another route."

He turned and made a signal to the Indians. The three of them eyed Jared as though estimating their best mode of attack. Jared took a step back, and he whipped out

his pistol, cocking back the hammer. Keokuk spoke a single word, almost grunted, that caused the Indians to wheel and face him.

"The white man has free passage to St. Louis. Black Hawk has said so, and now I have spoken."

The Indians shifted their glance to Killen. The trader scowled at Keokuk. "Ye talk to the King's man in these parts, Keokuk. I shall tell him that ye speak against him, that ye are not one for his service."

Keokuk threw back his shoulders and his fist struck his broad, bronze chest. "I am not the King's man. I am Keokuk and I follow my own trail. Jared is the friend of Keokuk and he goes to St. Louis, not Malden. I have spoken."

Killen took a half step forward, hand dropping down to his hatchet. Anger worked at his face, making it uglier than ever.

Jared spoke quietly. "Ye'd give me an excuse for shooting, Killen, and I've often sought one. If I miss, ye still have Keokuk and his warriors. Ye'd lose Black Hawk, too, since Saukenuk is refuge for both of us until we leave."

Killen checked but his hand still gripped his hatchet. He saw that his Indians had slowly withdrawn through the door and waited outside the hut. They would not attack Keokuk and there was too much at stake for Killen to make the first move. He faced Jared again.

"Ye can mark this down, Crandall. Next time ye'll have no help from such as him. Ye'll go to the nearest prison, and, blast me, ye'll rot there!"

He wheeled and walked out of the hut. Jared slowly lowered the pistol hammer and placed it in his belt. He slipped powderhorn over his shoulder and picked up his rifle. Keokuk checked him at the door.

"Wait. Keokuk and his warriors go with you. You will tell the Americans that Keokuk is friendly and has helped you, that Black Hawk and Keokuk see different ways."

THE JOURNEY from Saukenuk southward to St. Louis was made without incident. The first day out of the Sac village, neither Jared nor Keokuk were sure that Killen would not try an ambush, nor that Black Hawk might not change his mind and send the tribal warriors after the little party. But there was no sign of ambush and pursuit.

On the bank of the Mississippi, just North of St. Louis, Keokuk shook hands with Jared, refusing to go the few remaining miles to the city. Because of the war and rumors of Indian trouble, Keokuk would take no chance of trouble with the settlers or soldiers. He crossed the river and headed northwest while Jared went on to St. Louis alone.

He made his report to the commandant. The General sighed, slapped his desk and then cursed fervently.

"That means trouble all along the river! Blast that crazy Injun, Black Hawk!"

"Don't forget Mart Killen." Jared said dryly. "He sent Black Hawk to Malden for British weapons. Killen will be heading to the Winnebago right now."

The next day Jared left St. Louis and headed northwest to Fort Madison. His trading post was there and, more important, Marta Dalton. As he travelled northward, Jared left warning of the pending Indian trouble. Along the route he clearly saw that the frontier prepared for trouble.

At last he topped the hills and looked down on the flatlands along the Mississippi where Fort Madison stood. The high stockade looked stout and reassuring. Because of the high bluffs, the place looked easily defensible. Jared shifted his rifle to his other hand and, in relief, strode down the hill toward home.

The sentries at the gate grinned in recognition and Jared entered the compound. His store abutted against one of the stout walls. Soldiers, citizens and Indians went in and out of its low door. Jared's clerks kept the business going. Jared turned sharply to the left and walked to the headquarters building. Lieutenant Tom Hamilton, the commandant, was glad to see him.

"What's the news?" he demanded instantly. He was a young officer with a shock of corn gold hair and a wisp of a mustache over wide, pleasant lips. His furry, cockaded shako lay to one side on his desk. Jared sank down in a chair.

"Black Hawk's for war."

Hamilton's face clouded. "I was afraid of that. We keep hearing talk. The Winnebago are acting up. One of them was

blasted insolent day before yesterday and I had him bodily thrown out of the fort."

"That can be bad. Mart Killen's stirring them up for the King."

"Lumme! Ye'd know he'd be at the heart of it. Anything to bring him Injun business even if it means murder and pillage." Hamilton leaned forward, a frown creasing his full forehead. "Jared, Hunk Dalton will pay no heed to my warning. The rest of the settlers have come into the fort."

"That's like Hunk," Jared said. "I'm traveling that way. I'll see what I can do."

"Use force if ye have to," Hamilton sighed. "The Winnebago were a few miles upriver the last I heard. I'm ready to slam the gates and man the walls at a minute's notice."

"War," Jared sighed and shook his head, "It does no one any good."

He spent a few hours at the trading post, checking over the business that had been done in his absence. He watched the customers come in and out, particularly the Indians. There were several of them from the tribes westward and to the south. But no Sacs and no Winnebago. Jared mentioned it to his clerk.

"The Winnebago haven't been around since the Lieutenant th'owed one out the other day. Heard they was working themselves up into a mean pitch, your old friend, Mart Killen, backing 'em."

"When they don't come around, they mean trouble," Jared said. "I reckon I'd better go to Marta's cabin."

"Better. Her Paw has set himself contrary. He'll get himself skelped sure if he figures to set all alone in the wilderness."

Jared nodded and picked up his rifle. In a few moments he had left the stockade and headed northward toward the Dalton cabin. He left the flatlands behind and climbed into the hills. Beyond sight of the fort, the wilderness closed in.

Jared travelled in the long, easy stride of the woodsman that could cover miles without tiring a man. He constantly searched the brush and trees ahead, knowing that if hostile Indians were loose in the country, they would strike with very little warning. The road soon narrowed and the Dalton clearing was not far ahead. As yet there had been no sign of Indians, but Jared's fears did not lessen.

He heard the clear smack of an axe blade, loud and clear in the silence of the woods. Jared's lips set in a thin line. Hunk should know that he fairly shouted his presence to any stray Winnebago or Sac war band. Jared walked on and at last the trees thinned. He saw Hunk Dalton at the far edge of the clearing, making the last few strokes to fell a tree, the axe blade glittering in the sunshine.

The tree fell with a crash and Hunk mopped the sweat from his forehead. Jared crossed the clearing, throwing a hopeful glance toward the cabin. Marta was not in sight. Hunk turned as Jared approached, leaning his axe against the fallen tree.

HE WAS a small man, broad of shoulder with thick sturdy legs that fairly strained the weave of the linsey-woolsy trousers. His coarse brown shirt was stained with sweat. Jared's swift glance told him that Hunk had not so much as brought his rifle with him. Jared shook his head in keen disapproval.

"Hunk, ye grow more daft every day. Ye've had warning about the Indians."

"Law! You, too, Jared!" Hunk sighed. He had a square bony face, though fleshy around eyes that squinted up at Jared. His chin and jaw were stubborn. There were only a few wrinkles in his face, mostly at the corners of the eyes and at the root of the nose. Sandy hair showed flecks of gray at the temples and behind the ears.

"I can whup any Injun or band of 'em that come around, Jared Crandall, and ye know it!"

"I don't know it," Jared snapped. "I'm but lately from Saukenuk and I know what this frontier will face. Black Hawk's for war and so are the Winnebago. Hunk, ye've faced Injun troubles before and ye know what they can do. Ye'd best go to Fort Madison, for Marta's sake if not for your own."

"For Marta?" Hunk looked up. He rubbed his nose vigorously and chuckled. "Ye mistake the lass, and ye plan to marry her! If Hunk decides to stay, Marta stays. Ye can ask her now."

He picked up the axe and put it on his shoulder. Jared cursed under his breath and followed Hunk across the clearing to the cabin. A small patch of corn stood high and green, and just beyond was the vegetable

garden. Indians, Jared thought, could use the corn patch to good advantage in attacking the cabin. Beyond the garden patch stood a crude lean-to where Hunk's single work-horse munched contentedly.

The two men rounded the leanto and Jared saw Marta standing in the cabin doorway. At the sight of him, her lovely face lighted and she came running into his arms. He kissed her, holding her tight, while Hunk chuckled and watched.

Marta's sandy-red hair caught the sunlight in lovely coppery glints. She was about a head shorter than Jared, lithesome and lovely in the simple linsy dress that she wore. Her face was oval with high cheekbones delicately formed. Wide violet eyes carressed Jared and her red lips had parted in a soft smile.

"I'd feared for ye," she said simply. "We heard that Black Hawk had taken up the hatchet."

"I had safe conduct to St. Louis and Keokuk trailed with me," Jared answered. He held her at arm's length, his eyes traveling appreciatively over her. "Lord, but ye grow more beautiful each day, Marta."

"Ye speak daft, Jared," she blushed and smiled.

Jared's eyes clouded. "Ye'd best be in Fort Madison. I've come for ye and Hunk. He vows he'll not go."

"I'm well able to take care of myself," Hunk said forcefully.

Marta smiled and shrugged. "I stay with Father," she said simply and Jared made an impatient gesture. Her fingers lightly touched his arm, checking him. "Ye may be right, Jared, but can I do ought but stay with him?"

Jared gave up for the time being. He'd stay the night and in that time maybe he could argue Hunk around to his senses. By the time supper was over, Jared knew that Hunk could not be moved. Candelight flickered on his projecting jaw as he shook his head to Jared's arguments. At last Jared pushed back from the planked table in defeat.

"At least I'll take Marta back to the fort," he insisted. Marta shook her head regretfully.

"Ye still can't understand. I must stay with Father. He needs me at the cabin."

Jared threw up his hands, then smiled. She looked so lovely in candelight that he couldn't long remain angry with her. He leaned over the table.

"There's a full moon tonight. Everything is silver."

Hunk chuckled and pushed away. "Ye'd be examining it, you two Lumme, but every young couple since Adam and Eve has done the same! Git ye outside like the moonstruck calves ye be."

There was a full moon, riding high in a clear sky. It touched everything with an eery glow in the clearing. But the woods remained dark and somehow threatening. Jared took his rifle and would not stray further than a few yards from the cabin. But even so, the moonlight worked its subtle magic and it was several hours before they returned. Hunk snored blissfully in the darkness. Jared gave Marta a last kiss and fairly felt his way across the darkened cabin to the ladder that led to the loft. In a few moments he himself was sound asleep.

HE DIDN'T KNOW what awakened him. His eyes snapped open as his nerves jangled a warning. For a moment he lay perfectly still, the instinct of the wilderness bred. A faint, cold light seeped in under the eaves, and Jared knew that dawn had just broken.

There was no sound, and yet he knew that danger was close by. The feel of it was in every fibre. Jared rolled off the pallet and picked up his rifle. He walked to the trap door and looked down into the main room. Hunk and Marta slept peacefully. Jared climbed down the ladder and Hunk awoke with a snort. He sat up.

"Ye stir early," he complained.

Jared made a motion with his finger to his lips and then a gesture of warning. Hunk stared at him, eyes opening wide. Then his mouth snapped shut and he moved out of the bed, grabbing up his rifle. The two men edged to the door and pressed their ears against the rough hewn logs. The horse stamped in the leanto but there was no other sound. Hunk straightened.

"Ye had bad dreams," he whispered. Jared shook his head.

Marta awoke and her voice sounded soft with sleep. "Ye whisper like two boys raiding an orchard." She realized then that Jared's face was grim and tight

and that even Hunk stood tensely by the door.

Hunk moved back and shrugged. "Nothing at all. I'll show ye."

Before Jared could stop him, Hunk lifted the latch and opened the door. Jared moved to one side with a single lithe stride, his rifle held ready. But nothing happened. Hunk laughed and stepped out the door. The first red rays of the sun outlined his stocky figure, made him look faintly unreal in the dawn light. He turned to face Jared.

"Nought, as I told ye. Ye have—"

He grunted as the arrow buried deep in his back. Three more cut viciously through the open doorway and thudded into the rear wall. Marta screamed as a savage whoop sounded from the cornfield. Jared saw the Indians spring out into the open. Hunk came almost blindly toward the cabin, his knees already sagging.

Jared lifted his rifle and fired. A Winnebago halted in mid-stride, spun half around and fell in a senseless heap.

III

JARED pulled his pistol from his belt. Hunk reeled closer to the door and Jared jumped out to meet him. The arrow protruding from Hunk's back looked like a long black stick. His face was drawn with shock and his fingers clutched at Jared's shirt. Another Winnebago yelled and came rushing toward the cabin.

Jared downed one with his pistol. A rifle cracked from the cabin door and a second Indian fell. The rest faded back into the cornfield. Jared fairly pulled Hunk inside the cabin and slammed the door. He led the wounded man to the bed and then rushed back to his rifle.

Working swiftly with powder horn and ramrod, he stared out through a loophole. He could see none of the Indians but he knew they lurked in the cornfield. He heard Marta suppress a sob and he knew she worked with Hunk. Jared could not leave the loophole. If the Winnebago reached the cabin door, there would be no stopping them.

"Is it bad?" he asked over his shoulder. Marta didn't answer for a long while. Jared threw a hasty glance over his shoulder toward the bed.

Marta stood staring down at Hunk, her face drained of color. Her lips quivered and a single tear escaped and rolled down her cheek. Jared's glance cut to Hunk and he knew the answer. Only the dead could lay that way.

"Marta," Jared said softly, "Marta, I'll need your help. Ye can load and pass the other rifle."

Marta stood for another moment beside the bed, her arms straight at her side, her fists clenched. Then she whirled and rushed across the room. She picked up Hunk's rifle, loaded it. She accepted Jared's pistol, poured powder down the muzzle, rammed the bullet home. He peered out the loophole toward the cornfield.

The three Indians lay sprawled in the open where they had fallen. Corn moved suddenly and Jared's eyes narrowed. He shoved the rifle muzzle out through the loophole, pulled back the hammer. Two Indians wiggled out of the corn and Jared's shoulders hunched as he lined the sights on one shaved head, just below the scalp lock.

The Indians reached the first of the dead men, grabbed him by the legs and pulled him into the corn. They disappeared for a moment. Jared spoke over his shoulder.

"Take the rifle and watch the rear. They may try some trick."

He heard Marta move across the room. An Indian appeared again and once more Jared's rifle centered on him. The remaining dead Winnebago lay further from the shelter of the corn, and this time the Indian made a crouching rush for his comrade. Jared called a warning to Marta and she returned, shoving her rifle out through another loophole on the opposite side of the door. The Indian reached his comrade, stooped and threw the dead man over his shoulder. He streaked back into the corn and all was silent for a moment.

Then a savage, defiant yell sounded and arrows cut viciously through the air. A musket banged. Arrows and slugs thudded into the thick walls of the cabin and there was nothing more. Jared waited, eyes searching the many places where Indians could conceal themselves. This might have been a small raiding party detached from the main band. If so, there was a good

chance that they might move on after the hot reception they had received.

"Watch the back again," Jared said softly, and Marta obeyed.

The minutes dragged out into an eternity. An hour passed and there was no further sign of the attackers. Jared straightened and stretched to relieve strained muscles, pulling the rifle free of the loophole. Marta remained at her post, never taking her eyes from the patch of cleared ground behind the cabin.

"Are they gone?" she asked.

"I don't know. Ye can never be sure."

"Jared," Marta said without turning her head. "Could ye take care of Father? I mean—the arrow. The rest I can help ye with, but the arrow—fair horrors me."

"I'll do it," Jared answered. He peered outside again, carefully searching the corn. "Ye'll be coming with me to the Fort now, Marta, though we run a slim chance of reaching it. But I'll take care of ye."

"I know, Jared." Marta's voice broke. "There's nought here now for me."

Jared waited another hour and then cautiously opened the door. There was no sudden flight of arrows or sudden yells. He stepped outside, rifle ready, Marta covering him from the cabin. Nothing happened and Jared moved to the leanto. He reached it without incident. The horse looked around at him with patient, wide eyes, switched its tail. Jared felt the tension leave him. He grounded his rifle and leaned on the long barrel for a moment. The Winnebago were gone and at least the immediate danger was over.

"It's clear, Marta," he called.

He returned to the cabin and worked on the arrow in Hunk's body. The head was buried deep beyond the barbs and the shaft had splintered. Using his knife, Jared cut the remainder of the protruding shaft away and carefully wrapped Hunk in a couple of blankets. Carrying rifle and spade, he disappeared beyond the lean-to for some time. Marta waited, dry-eyed.

Gently as he could, he picked up Hunk's body. The dead weight made his knees buckle a little but he managed to get the body to the grave. He laid Hunk to rest in his own little clearing. Finished, he threw the spade behind the leanto and returned to the cabin. Marta kept control of herself by gathering up belongings and tying them in a huge shawl. She picked up her father's rifle.

"I'm ready, Jared."

Jared considered her a moment, eyes lingering on each soft contour of her face, the lips that wanted to tremble, the eyes that were courageous despite the slight film of tears that touched them. Jared spoke almost humbly.

"Marta, ye be the kind that makes the frontier into a civilized place." He lifted his pistol from his belt and handed it to her. "Keep it close and handy. Don't use it on the Winnebago if they attack us. The load's for yourself."

"Thanks," she said and placed the pistol just under the knot of the bundle. She picked it up, took the rifle in the other hand and looked swiftly around the room. "Let's go before I cry my heart out."

Outside, Jared closed the door, though it seemed a useless thing to do. A closed door would mean nothing to pilfering Winnebago and probably by morning this whole place would be up in smoke. Jared placed a rope hackamore around the horse and helped Marta to mount. He handed her the bundle and rifle and then stalked off, down the road to Fort Madison. Marta followed after him.

FOR SEVERAL MILES Jared remained on the road. Then, as he came to the last high hills that overlooked the fort, he grew more cautious. He cut away from the road, seeking all the cover he could find for Marta and the horse. It was well he did. He had approached a thick stand of trees and had just plunged into them when he halted, pulling up short. He grabbed the horse's muzzle. Marta looked through the screen of bushes and sucked in her breath.

A long file of Indians moved silently and swiftly northward. Each warrior moved in the steps of the man ahead and the whole line went at a fast trot, their very silence making them seem more dangerous and deadly. Each bronze face bore the wide bands of war paint. Lances, bows, arrows and muskets, Jared noted them all as the war band passed and disappeared as silently as they had appeared.

"They're getting in position to attack the Fort," Jared whispered to Marta.

"From the way they act, they know they haven't been discovered yet and they plan a surprise."

"The fort's well defended."

"Aye," Jared nodded, "if they have a moment's warning. The Winnebago won't let 'em have it. Mart Killen has primed them well, ye can see. If Madison is destroyed, and my post with it, then Killen can have his own way in these parts."

Marta shivered. "The fort must know."

Jared stared ahead toward the break in the hills where they sloped down on to the flatlands before the river. In his mind's eye he saw clearly every detail of the land ahead, where the Winnebago would most likely launch their attack. His lips pressed flat together.

"It's like running a gauntlet," he said. "Dare ye ride it with me, Marta?"

"I dare anything with ye, Jared."

He handed her his rifle and vaulted behind her on the horse's back. He took the rope hackamore and drummed his moccasined heels against the animal's ribs, heading it straight for the break in the hills. The horse moved at a lumbering but speedy gallop. They sounded like a tornado loose in the woods, Jared thought, but speed alone counted now—speed and surprise.

THEY CAME UP over the saddle of the hill racing through bush, interspersed here and there with trees. For a time they saw nothing and then, topping the saddle, they saw the fort below them, the gates standing wide. Abruptly the bush around them erupted Indians. They sped arrows to the horse and one buried itself deep in the fat rump. The horse bolted as if the hounds of Gehenna were behind it. An Indian made a leap for the rope bridle. Marta swung her bundle, smashing it squarely into the red face. The Winnebago fell back.

Jared's heels beat a devil's tattoo on the horse's side. The Indians did not yell, attempting desperately to stop the riders without alarming the fort. An arrow snicked close to Jared's head, so close that he instinctively ducked. Another Indian came racing up but Jared's foot slammed into his chest and he catapulted backward. The horse swept on down the slope. Jared lifted the long rifle and fired it into the air.

Instantly the alarm swept through the fort. Jared had a brief glimpse of the guards waving on those who streamed toward the fort from the cabins and fields that huddled close to its walls. But Jared had only a swift impression of that. He twisted around, trying to bring the long rifle to bear on the racing Indians just behind.

The weapon was awkward to handle on horseback, never made for that kind of shooting. Jared tried to hold it in line and pulled the trigger. The powder flashed and the gun roared. His missed the Winnebago, but came close enough. The man jumped to one side.

They came again to the road, scattering the running settlers as the horse took a bee-line for the stockade gates. Jared waved his empty rifle toward the hills and yelled his warning. Soldiers in their furred shakos appeared above the stockade, standing on the fire platform. The horse swept into the gate and Jared reached around Marta, sawing savagely on the hackamore. The horse came to a sliding, dust-roiling halt. Jared jumped to the ground, swiftly exchanged the empty rifle for Marta's loaded one.

The last of the settlers streamed into the fort and the heavy gates swung shut. A savage yell of disappointment sounded beyond the walls and the soldiers on the firing platform levelled their muskets. They fired a volley and swiftly reloaded. Jared ran up the stairs, taking them two at a time.

He pulled up short on the firing platform facing Lieutenant Hamilton. The young officer grinned crookedly at him.

"Ye cut that one fairly close, Jared. How many of the devils?"

"I don't know exact. A full war party, mayhap the whole tribe since they have the nerve to attack the fort."

The second volley rang out and the soldiers cheered. Jared peered from between the high points of the logs. The Winnebago streamed back just out of musket range, but they had left several of their comrades lying scattered before the stockade. Jared's eyes circled the hills that surrounded the fort to the river. Everywhere he saw the Winnebago or signs of them. He watched. Hamilton's eyes narrowed as he saw a distant parley of chieftains.

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"What think ye, Jared? Will they draw off now?"

"I'd expect it, but not before morning. Indians don't generally have the patience to besiege a place. They hit, and, if there's too much fight or too strong defenses, they draw off and try for better luck elsewhere."

"I've heard that from officers that have fought more Injuns than I've ever seen," Hamilton nodded. He pointed toward the distant parley. "But there's a mighty deal of jabbering over there."

"Wait," Jared counseled.

IV

IT SOON became apparent that the Winnebago, at least until their next attack, planned to keep the defenders within the fort. At the end of the parley, the warriors formed a tight ring around the stockade, just outside of musket range. The Indians settled themselves as though to stay indefinitely. Hamilton descended from the firing platform, his eyes worried.

"If it's siege, we're in bad shape for one. We can hold out for a week but no longer. Food will last about that long."

"Tonight and the morning will tell," Jared answered hopefully. "I reckon they'll try one more attack and draw off."

Hamilton said nothing and turned to his headquarters cabin. Up on the firing platform, now that the first fright and excitement had worn off, the soldiers joked with one another or cursed at the Winnebago for disturbing their routine. In the fort itself, the refugee settler started cooking fires. Children played at being Indians, rushing madly through the crowd. Somewhere a baby cried fretfully. Marta waited at the trading store and she looked up swiftly when Jared came in.

"Tonight will tell," Jared said briefly. Almost as an afterthought he turned to the clerk. "Check our powder and ball and be ready to turn it over to Lieutenant Hamilton."

Marta's eyes widened but she said nothing. She sensed that Jared worried more than he was willing to admit. From beyond the stockade a steady thrumming started—Indian drums beating out a war dance.

That night the men on the walls waited tense throughout the long dark hours. From time to time they heard the swelling rhythm of the Indian dance. Campfires formed a wide-spread ring around the fort, except on the river side. But there was no escape for the garrison in that direction and the Winnebago seemed to know it. Just before dawn a challenge rang out. If the Winnebago intended another atttack, this would be their favorite hour.

"Friend, consarn ye," a voice answered in a desperate, hoarse call. "Be ye wanting me skelp to be lifted? Open up and let me in!"

Jared stood beside Hamilton as the gates were opened a crack and a shadowy form slipped inside. A soldier lifted high a lantern, revealing a seamed, tanned face beneath a coonskin cap. The newcomer shifted a quid of tobacco from one leathery cheek to another, his facial wrinkles rippling like water as he chewed.

"Who are you?" Hamilton demanded.

"Name's Obed Higbee, sojer. Been trapping no'th and come down the river. Sighted all them Injuns and figured the fort was the safest place for this coon."

"How'd ye slip through their lines?"

"Didn't. Got a canoe at the foot of the bluffs."

Quiet settled once more on the fort. Hamilton ordered his troops and all the armed settlers to the walls. Dawn was a matter of minutes away. He took Higbee to his quarters, leaving Jared in charge of the defense.

At last the first faint streaks of light appeared in the east. The Indian fires had died down and a mist came up from the river, covering the flat plain around the fort. The Winnebago could use it as an excellent means of slipping up to the very walls. Jared moved around the stockade, speaking a quiet word here and there to steady the men.

The light strengthened and still the Winnebago had not attacked. Jared peered through the dissolving mist, certain that the Indians would be close. Then, without warning a whole flight of fire arrows came out of the fog. They arched high over the stockade, their flaming points like small meteorites. Many of them struck harmlessly in the ground.

A woman screamed, struck. Others thudded into the dry roofs of some of the buildings and started to smoulder. Jared

called orders and a bucket line was swiftly formed from the well in the center of the stockade. Men moved quickly to check the fires before they were fairly started.

Out of the mist came dark, hurtling shapes. Instantly muskets banged, the volley ripping into the attacking Indians. They faded back and were gone. The sun touched the eastern horizon and the mist began to disappear. It lifted and then was gone, exposing the whole plain before the fort.

The Winnebago had once more withdrawn beyond rifle range. They had taken their dead and wounded with them. Hamilton came pounding up the steps to the firing platform. He looked out and saw the ring of the besiegers still investing the lower slopes of the hills.

"They don't intend to leave," Jared said quietly. "There's more than a few Indian chiefs behind this. Someone wants Fort Madison out of the way and that'd be naught but the British."

Hamilton nodded. "Aye, then the upper part of the river would be open to them if they gained control of the Great Lakes. Lumme, St. Louis and the Ohio Country would be mighty hot for Americans then!"

"Mart Killen is somewhere over there," Jared said evenly. "I hope I have the chance to meet him."

The smoking roofs had been quickly doused with water and there was no harm done. The whole fort settled down to a siege that no one believed would last very long. Frontiersmen knew Indian ways too well. They had no patience for long-drawn-out operations or attacks. They'd move on to more exposed places where their chances of victory would be better.

But the Winnebago remained before the fort. Because of the great number of civilian refugees from the outlying settlements and cabins, the food supply diminished at an alarming rate. No one worried at first. The Winnebago would be tired of the siege and gone before the food gave out. Three days later, Mart Killen showed his hand, and face. A soldier brought word the Indians held out a white flag of truce.

JARED and Hamilton, with two armed soldiers, went just outside the gate to hold the parley. A Winnebago chief, Mart Killen and two warriors stopped a few paces from them. Jared returned Mart's jeering look with a stony glance.

"Turned renegade at last," Jared said. Mart flushed and answered angrily.

"I serve my King where I'm ordered to."

"A nice way of saying murder and pillage," Jared snapped. Hamilton cut in, a touch impatiently.

"What's the truce for, Killen?"

"Naught else but surrender, Lieutenant," Killen answered. "Ye have no chance to hold out and the Winnebago will stay here for months if it's necessary."

"No," Hamilton snapped. "I've got women and children to think of. Your friends treat prisoners badly, Killen, and ye know it."

"Now as to that," Killen answered easily, "I can assure ye that naught will happen to 'em. They'll be on their way to St. Louis without a speck of harm. Ye have my word for it. We'll take the fort and that's all we want."

"Ye have your Winnebago well trained," Jared said. "Most Indians only want scalps and to count coupe, not forts."

"Now ye may say that, Crandall," Killen grinned. "I have taught them a thing or two. Ye see, I make sure that there's no fort here—nor no trading post like your own. I promise no massacre and no killing. Lay down your arms and march off safe as ye please to St. Louis. My word on't."

"Your word," Hamilton made a swift negative gesture with his arm, "is worth no more than that. Any who would take Indians on the warpath against his own kind—"

"Take it or let it lay," Killen snarled, "and make up your mind fast. Ye surrender or my Winnebago starve and burn ye out. This I promise, do ye not surrender, there'll be no mercy once the fort falls."

"We'll wait and see," Hamilton drew himself up. "My answer to surrender is no."

"Fool!" Killen growled. "On ye be the bloodshed."

He turned on his heel and strode off. The Indians glared at the soldiers and then trotted after Killen. Hamilton and Jared turned back to the fort and the gate

closed ponderously behind them. Hamilton led the way directly to his quarters. He sank down in a chair, sighing wearily and passing his hand over his face. Jared stood by the door, watching the activity within the stockade. He spoke without turning his head.

"Ye be gambling, Tom."

"Aye," Hamilton admitted. "I hope for relief from St. Louis. My report is long overdue and by now word has surely spread of the Winnebago attack. The Commandant won't let me sit here and starve."

"Not likely," Jared admitted, "if ye didn't have Black Hawk to think of. By now he's back from Malden, primed with British talk and British arms. Aye, the Sacs will be taking the warpath and the Commandant has not too many troops."

Hamilton looked up. "Ye've read my mind, Jared."

The two men were silent for a moment. Jared listened for the sound of Indian drums but there were none. The men on the walls were relieved, came stamping wearily back to their barracks. Jared turned into the room.

"How long can ye hold out?"

"Not much longer. I may have to trust to Killen's word, though it's like using a reed for a staff."

"If news got to St. Louis—" Jared started but Hamilton's sardonic laugh cut him short.

"How? A man would need wings to get beyond the Winnebago—or be invisible. Aye, if the Commandant knew how desperate we were, he might send relief. But he won't know until it's over one way or the other."

"The night will be dark," Jared said thoughtfully. "A man might get through if he had luck. Aye, there's always a chance. I'll take your leave tonight, Tom, and see what can be done."

Hamilton stared heavily at him. "I give ye no orders, Jared, and I don't know what ye'll be doing. If you risk your neck—and lose it—it's your personal business. I've tried to slip Higbee back down to the river, but the Winnebago found his canoe and destroyed it. They watch that way. They fill the hills."

"I'll try. What's the word for the night should I fail and have to return?"

"Mad Anthony," Hamilton answered.

There was no moon and the stars seemed far away and faint. Jared said nothing to Marta and he left her as casually as though he returned to his blankets for the night. At the store he checked powderhorn, rifle and pistol. He filled a little bag with pemmican and looped the thong over his shoulder. Ready at last, he slipped from the store and moved through the darkness toward the gates. Hamilton waited there and he grasped Jared's hand.

"Luck go with ye," Hamilton whispered.

JARED nodded and signalled to the guard. The gate opened just wide enough for him to slip through. It closed and he heard the heavy bars slide into place. He stood silent for a moment, eyes and ears probing the darkness. Far off, he saw the winking fires of the Indians but close to the fort there was no sound or sign of life.

He loosened the knife in its sheath and his fingers touched the hatchet, somehow reassuring. Jared moved off from the fort, angling toward the river. He stopped every few feet and listened, muscles tensed. The Winnebago would have scouts constantly patrolling the darkness, skulkers who would be only too happy to bring a white scalp into the council fires as a trophy.

The walls of the fort disappeared in the darkness behind him. Long grass carpeted his steps so that Jared moved along silent as a ghost. Several yards out from the stockade, he checked and dropped flat. He drew his knife and waited, fist tight around the hilt. He heard a slight rustling sound and he hugged the ground, peering up to the sky against the limited horizon.

Suddenly a star blotted out and reappeared, only to blot out again. Four Indians moved silently less than five yards from him. Jared held his breath and his hand gripped the knife until it seemed the bones would break through the flesh. His leg muscles tensed, ready to spring. The Indians moved on, but Jared remained flat, breathing shallowly, listening. He heard no other sound.

At last he cautiously arose, eyes straining to tear aside the veil of the night. He moved on, slowly, ready for trouble. At last he approached the bluffs that over-

looked the river. He had a vague plan to drop below them, reach the river. He could slip into the current and let it carry him far below the Indian lines. Once beyond them, he could swim to the bank and the trip to St. Louis would then be only a problem of distance.

At last Jared reached the edge of the bluff and peered over. He instantly saw the spot of light that marked an Indian fire. He heard vague noises that told him the river bank was heavily patrolled and that he could not hope to reach the stream. For a time, Jared lay flat, watching, trying to figure some other plan.

He sighed. There was nothing for it but the hazardous job of crawling through the very heart of the Indian ring around the post. He edged back from the bank and arose, considering the line of the camp fires, now much closer. At one point they seemed to be thinner and Jared knew his only chances would be in that direction.

He moved away from the river. He dared not hurry though every instinct urged him to do so. Very gradually the fires grew brighter as he slowly approached them. It took a great deal of time now to cover very little ground.

At last, Jared started edging forward on his hands and knees. The fires were not far ahead and to either side. At any moment he might be challenged or some one might blunder onto him. Jared was thankful for the thick, high grass and for an occasional low bush that gave him at least partial shelter.

He had only a split second warning before disaster struck. He heard a slight rustle of grass just behind him. A Winnebago warrior stepped directly on his back.

V

INSTANTLY, he twisted around and the Winnebago sprawled headlong. Jared's knife fairly jumped into his fist and he threw himself on the warrior. His hand snaked upward and his fingers taloned into the man's throat. The Indian's yell was only a gurgle that carried less than a couple of yards.

But the threshing the two men made would alarm the whole camp in a matter of minutes. Jared's lips set grimly and he tried to hold the Winnebago down. The Indian had twisted half around and his knife glittered dully in the starlight. He cut upward, viciously, and Jared threw his body to one side. The blade ripped through his buckskin shirt and left a sting of fire along his ribs.

Jared's own knife hand lifted, plunged downward. The Indian stiffened and then collapsed. Jared kept his grip on the man's throat until he was sure the Winnebago was dead.

There was no sound of alarm. The fight had attracted no one's attention. Jared slowly expelled his breath and he felt as if a weight had been lifted from his heart. He moved on, heading down the dark lane between the fires.

In a moment he discovered that this path was also closed to him. He came on the first of many blanketed, sleeping forms. He moved to the left and saw more. Almost desperate, he edged far to the right and found more sleeping Winnebago. There would be no chance to work his way through them. He cursed under his breath and started a slow circle of the siege ring.

It was too tight. Warriors constantly moved around the fires and they were dangerous. Between them warriors slept and small parties moved constantly so that there was the risk of discovery at every moment. Jared realized that the river bank, despite the Winnebago down there, was his only slim chance. He left the fires and started again in that direction.

He had gone a matter of only a few yards when he heard a shout of alarm. He checked and listened, knew that the man he had killed was discovered. The Indians, alerted, would search every square foot between their camp and the fort. Discovery was certain now if he remained out here much longer and there was no chance of breaking through to St. Louis.

Jared turned back to the fort, coming to his feet and running at a crouch. He heard the alarm spread around the ring of fires. Angry shouts spurred him on, though as yet he had not been spotted by the Indians. The high logs of the stockade loomed up out of the darkness and a rough voice challenged him.

"Mad Anthony," Jared called the password, "and waste no time. It's going to be hot out here."

It seemed an infinity before he heard the heavy bars draw aside and the gates opened just enough for him to slip inside. Hamilton met him and Jared reported his failure.

"Mart Killen is taking no chances," Jared summed it up. "He's got those Indians conducting a siege like regular army veterans."

In the next several days the Winnebago tried many tricks to win the fort. Twice they used fire arrows followed instantly by frontal assaults, but these were beaten back. Once they used the early morning fog and the battle raged fast and hot around the very gates and parapet of the fort. Under Killen's direction, the Winnebago apparently withdrew, giving up the siege. Instantly the settlers within the post wanted to return to their cabins and fields and it was all that Hamilton and Jared could do to hold them within the stockade.

For twenty-four hours, there was no sign of Indians and the unrest grew. But soon the wisdom of caution proved itself. The Winnebago again established their ring around the post, the ruse of drawing out the garrison having failed.

Jared noticed that this time the Winnebago paid no attention to the narrow beaches below the river, apparently believing that the fast-flowing stream was barrier enough. Jared watched the river, bright and jewel-like in the sunlight. It was the only break in the savage line and his brain devised plans to use it.

The food supply finally became critical and rations were cut. There was no sign that the Winnebago intended to leave, no hope of relief from St. Louis. Hamilton's young face became deeply lined with worry and Jared could no longer honestly encourage Marta. The time rapidly approached when something desperate must be attempted. Hamilton had it in mind when, using his long glass, he lowered it and turned to Jared beside him on the parapet.

"The Winnebago have their canoes upstream about two miles. If we had them, we could slip across the river."

"We could," Jared agreed, staring at the open space between the fort and the high banks, "if we were invisible to the Indians. We'd have to be."

"Magic," Hamilton said wryly. "I'm about ready to try it."

"That's it!" Jared snapped his fingers and turned to Hamilton. "We can get to the bank and not be seen! A tunnel, under the walls of the fort to below the bluffs. The Indians aren't patrolling it."

Hamilton's face lit and then the hope left his eyes. "That could be done, but what about the river?"

"The Indian canoes. Higbee, myself and some of the others could slip through the tunnel to the river. We could swim beyond the Winnebago and reach their canoes. It would be simple to float them downstream to the fort. After that—"

"Too much risk," Hamilton objected, but Jared had an answer for that one.

"Make a fake attack to keep the Winnebago busy, too busy to watch the river. All of us could slip out, burn the fort."

"Wait," Hamilton said, "you're throwing ideas too fast. Let me think it over."

"It's our only chance," Jared said soberly. "We take the chances or we face Winnebago hatchets and knives. Killen won't be satisfied with less than our scalps."

HAMILTON hesitated until evening and the small amount of the rations decided him. Jared gave him shovels, spades and picks from his store. The soldiers started digging within the stockade, dropping a shaft below the level of the walls and then lining it toward the river. Jared rounded up Obed Higbee and about ten other men who would run the lines for their canoes. Jared squatted with them against the stockade wall. A nearby fire sent flickering shadows across their gaunt faces as they listened to his plan. Jared finished and sat back on his heels.

"You take a long chance," Obed said slowly, "and ye might be a gone coon if the Winnebago got their fingers on ye. But waiting here is the same thing. Me, I reckon I'll play with ye."

Jared looked around at the others and they silently nodded agreement, one by one. Jared smiled his thanks but that was all. These wilderness men didn't go much on talking. Instead, Jared leaned forward and traced a map of the river on the hard-packed ground. He marked the spot where the canoes were beached.

"We can edge along the banks where the current's not strong. We won't have it to fight. If a Winnebago happens along the shore, I reckon all of us know how to stay under water for awhile, or swim quietly."

"I reckon," Obed agreed. His grizzled brows arched. "Swimming, we cain't figure on rifles."

"Only knife and hatchet," Jared answered grimly.

The soldiers dug all night, relieved at regular intervals by the settlers. The pile of dirt beside the shaft grew. Hamilton set men to tearing down some of the cabins within the fort so that the timber could be used for supports. By morning, the diggers were well beyond the line of the walls.

The sentries that day paid more attention to the stretch of ground between the fort and the river than anything else. So long as the Indians kept their distance, they would not hear the sound of the digging and they wouldn't be likely to come within such murderous musket range in broad daylight.

By nightfall the sappers were half way to the river bluff and another cabin had been quickly torn down, passed log by log into the tunnel. After a brief conference, Hamilton decided to continue the digging through the night. Prowling Winnebago might slip between the fort and the river, but time was now important and the chance had to be run.

About mid-morning the next day the men at the tunnel head used their picks and spades with care. They tackled the dirt almost gingerly, knowing that any moment they would break into the open. A soldier's pick finally broke through and a jagged hole of daylight appeared. Digging stopped and Hamilton ordered all but two guards back into the stockade.

The whole fort waited impatiently until nightfall. The moment full night came, Jared and his men trailed into the tunnel after the squad of soldiers with picks and spades. The men enlarged the hole and Jared edged down the high bank to the beach. There were no Indians about and Jared slipped noiselessly into the river. Obed followed just behind him and the rest eased into the water.

Jared hugged the bank and saw three of the men swimming close behind him. Satisfied, Jared straightened and swam on upstream. From time to time, he cut into the bank, resting in the shallow water. Above the high bluffs he could see the glow of the Indian fires grow brighter and then fade behind him. He moved more caustiously now. The canoes would not be far ahead.

A single small fire glowed on the beach where the canoes rested. Jared moved in silently, eyes keened to find the Winnebago guard. He saw the man move to the fire and squat down. Jared pulled his knife from its sheath and drifted into the shadows of the canoes. His feet struck bottom and he carefully lifted himself, eyes peering over the sides. The Indian's broad back was to him, a matter of ten yards away. Jared considered how to reach the man without alarming him. He heard a soft sound and Obed Higbee stood beside him. The oldster made a gesture and his arm flashed back, snapped forward. The heavy knife split the air and buried itself hilt deep in the Indian's back. The man fell to one side without a sound.

JARED glanced at the stars. They never about on schedule. There was no need to give orders, each man knew what he was to do. Silently the canoes moved into the water, some of them lashed together. Each man merely held to the sterns, guiding them to keep them from the main current, and allowed the river to float canoes and himself downstream.

The men once more grew tense as they approached the Indian camp and the fires glowed from beyond the high banks. But they were passed much more quickly and easily than at first, and at last Jared guided his two canoes into the bank just below the tunnel mouth. He left the rest to watch while he scrambled up the bank and into the tunnel.

The moment he appeared inside the stockade, Hamilton started things moving after just a word to make sure the canoes had been captured. Instantly troopers started the women and children down the shaft. Another detail of soldiers moved to the gates, their muskets loaded and their faces grim. A second detail started laying materials for fire.

Marta came to Jared and, wet as he was,

he took her in his arms and kissed her hard. She clung to him until Jared forcibly disengaged her arms.

"Tom," he called, "take care of Marta. As soon as I'm through here I'll join ye on the other bank of the river."

"But they'll kill ye, Jared," Marta whispered.

Jared laughed and shook his head. "Not me. Don't ye know you and I are destined to live a long life together? Into the tunnel with ye, and look for me on the other bank."

She looked back at him before she disappeared below the lip of the shaft and Jared waved at her. Lantern light made the streak of tears along her cheeks glitter. Jared felt a slight choking in his own throat and he turned hastily away, hurrying to join the soldiers who laid the fires.

"Lumme," he muttered savagely under his breath, "but I got to win through this! Heaven'll be no fine place without her—nor hell either, for that matter."

He hurried to his own store and viciously started throwing boxes of merchandise on the floor. The broken wood made excellent kindling and would catch instantly once the torch was applied.

VI

IT SEEMED an eternity before a sergeant called orders for the soldiers themselves to drop into the tunnel. The men by the gate had waited tensely to create a diversion should the Winnebago come too close to the stockade. The Indians had conveniently remained around their fires and these soldiers moved back with a look of intense relief on their faces. They were gone and Jared stood alone in the middle of the stockade.

Around the empty quadrangle stood a few troopers with torches in their hands. They watched Jared, waiting for his signal. He deliberately counted off the minutes, giving the soldiers plenty of time to reach the canoes and be half way across the river. He stiffened when he heard a savage yell beyond the stockade. The Winnebago had discovered the theft of their canoes. Jared turned and lifted his torch high, swinging it so that the flames grew stronger. He pitched it through the open doorway of his trading post. Instantly the soldiers applied their torches to barracks, headquarters cabin, storerooms and stables.

Flames crackled, gained strength and flared high. Instantly the Indians came charging down on the post, yelling. Arrows looped high over the stockade. Jared stood by as the troopers dropped down the shaft and into the tunnel. He gave a last look around at the flaming fort. Unopposed, the Indians scaled the walls. Jared scrambled down the ladder in the shaft and raced through the tunnel.

He struck the water behind the last trooper. A howl of anger and chagrin came from the blazing fort, carrying above the roar of the flames. The current caught Jared and swept him downstream and he struck out with powerful strokes for the opposite bank.

A canoe came close. Friendly hands grabbed him and Jared swung aboard. He shook the water from his eyes. On the far bank Winnebago yelled in mad fury at the escape of their prey. But Jared paid little attention to them.

He watched Fort Madison go up in flames. He watched his own trading post burn in the holocaust. Everything he owned with the exception of what he carried on his person had been destroyed. He was no longer a trader but one of the thousands that the war had ruined. Everything must be built up once more, Jared must start life over again. Mart Killen had definitely won the first round in his fight to control the trade of the Winnebago and Sacs.

Safe for the time on the eastern bank of the river, Hamilton and Jared organized the settlers and soldiers into makeshift column and they started southward. For a time, the rearguard expected almost momentary attack, but the Winnebago seemed content with the victory of a fire-gutted post. At long last, the garrison and refugees reached the safety of St. Louis.

Jared and Marta were married there and Jared accepted a post as scout and interpreter to the army. For the next year he was constantly on the move, westward, or across the river into the uncertain territory of Illinois and Indiana.

These were perilous times and no man knew if the British flag would fly from Mackinac to New Orleans. Up on the lakes, far to the east and north, American and British fought for control. Along the

eastern seaboard the King's armies spread havoc, even burning Washington itself. Along the frontier, Indian bands raided and pillaged almost at will. Jared fully expected a regular British army to advance southward, engulfing the Ohio country and the whole length of the Mississippi.

Only Perry on the Great Lakes prevented it. No British army could move south from Detroit and Malden so long as the Americans were a dangerous threat to their flank and rear. Instead, little bands of Irregulars or men like Mart Killen moved among the Indian tribes, keeping them on the warpath. Black Hawk and his war band of Sacs, the Winnebago, the Shawnee were constantly on the prowl and the western garrisons were worked to the haggard point of collapse trying to check them.

Keokuk remained west of the Mississippi with the few of the Sacs who had refused war. Black Hawk had lost many men, more than his victories were worth, and the American commandant heard that there was disaffection among the war chief's warriors. Keokuk might, at this moment, swing Black Hawk's followers to peace and some of the pressure against the garrisons would be released. Black Hawk's band crossed the river, moving toward Keokuk's village. Needing more fighting men, Black Hawk obviously intended to urge Keokuk to take up the hatchet.

Jared was sent northwestward to find Keokuk and keep him peaceful—better yet, to use Keokuk's desire for peace to check Black Hawk. Jared went alone, bearing presents to Keokuk and a message of amnesty and friendship for Black Hawk, if he would listen.

Jared travelled fast and hard, racing to beat Black Hawk and his band. He was but a day from Keokuk's village when he came to a small stream. He threw himself flat and drank, grateful for the cool water, and brief chance to rest before plunging onward. He lifted his face from the water, sighed and rolled over.

FIVE Sac warriors stood in a silent ring around him. One of them was Black Hawk. Jared stared at them, stunned by surprise. The Sacs made no move, only watched him with glittering eyes. Jared's muscles tensed and he suddenly threw himself into the stream.

The Sacs yelled. A hatchet just missed Jared's head and splashed into the water before his face. He plunged beneath the surface, his powerful arms shooting him forward. He came up for air and instantly a pair of powerful arms circled him. Jared struck with fist and feet and the choking talons lost their grip. Jared swam on.

He reached shallow water and came to his feet. He plunged toward the bank, the Sacs at his heels. His rifle was gone but the pack hampered him. He had just reached the brush when he heard pounding steps just behind him. Jared whirled.

It was Black Hawk himself, far in advance of his comrades. The war chief smashed into Jared and the two men went down in a fighting, threshing tangle. Black Hawk's hatchet raised but Jared's hand cracked against his wrist. The hatchet flew from Black Hawk's fingers. Jared's own knife was out and he plunged the blade upward.

Black Hawk's fingers caught Jared's wrist and twisted savagely so that the knife went wide. Jared smashed his fist into the man's face, drove it home again. Black Hawk could not take the punishment and did not know how to parry fists. His head snapped back and Jared measured his chin. His blow landed true and Black Hawk slumped.

Jared tried to scramble out from under the limp body and did make it to his knees. Then three of the Sacs threw themselves on him. Jared was smashed flat, but he tried to wriggle free. The Indians grunted and their muscles bunched as they tried to hold him. At last one of them brought the hilt of his knife down on the back of Jared's head. Lights flashed in his eyes and he felt as though he dropped deep into a black funnel. Then even that sensation was gone.

He must have been unconscious for a long time. His eyes blinked open and he looked up to the dark roof of a hut. A small fire burned in the packed floor at the center of the hut, flickering redly, disclosing a circle of silent Indians. Jared did not move. He recognized Black Hawk instantly. There were some sub-chiefs and not far away sat Keokuk. Black Hawk leaned forward and stared hard at Jared. The mark of Jared's fists were still plain.

"He has come back," Black Hawk said.

Keokuk stirred. "He is my friend and this is my village and my band. I demand his safety."

Black Hawk straightened, though his face told nothing. He seemed to consider the question and then shook his head. "I come to Keokuk for his help. The Sacs are divided and that should not be. We are winning against the Americans, who would steal our tribal lands, and it is only right that all the Sacs should share in the glory."

"You do not win," Keokuk spoke evenly. "You have been told lies by the crooked tongues of men like Mart Killen. You have gained nothing but death to your young men and brave warriors. The Americans will always be here. The Sacs can not stop them. Black Hawk has listened to evil tongues."

Black Hawk smiled, the pursed lips breaking slowly. His narrowed eyes glittered and he swept his arm around to the door.

"Black Hawk has brought four warriors with him. Does Keokuk believe that is all Black Hawk has? Even now the Father-King's man leads the Sacs in an attack on the Americans. They go up the Great River in boats and a trap is laid for these soldiers. They will be driven back and destroyed. So Black Hawk cannot win?"

Jared listened and his lips flattened. He was securely bound and could not move. For a long time silence held the hut. Keokuk seemed to see at a distance, his eyes dreamy. At last he shrugged and looked directly at Jared.

"Mayhaps Black Hawk and the Sacs will win this time, but not always. Keokuk is at peace and remains at peace. Keokuk cannot understand why Black Hawk fights."

"Because," Black Hawk's face worked in fury, "the tribal lands are sacred to the Sacs, because the Americans would take them all and push the Sacs to the setting sun. Black Hawk will fight for every foot, every clod, of his father's country. I have spoken."

"Give me this man," Keokuk said, abruptly changing the subject. Black Hawk glared at Jared and slowly rubbed his jaw. He shook his head.

"No, he is Black Hawk's prisoner. He goes to my own camp where his fate will be decided."

Long into the night the argument continued between Black Hawk and Keokuk and neither man gained a point. Jared came to understand Black Hawk during those long, black hours. He fought for what he considered the greatest good of his tribe. He had watched the westward advance of the Americans. He had seen the Iroquois smashed, the Miamis beaten and now the Shawnee fought a losing battle. Everywhere, the Indian was crushed beneath the advance. Black Hawk had determined that this would not happen to the Sacs. Jared drifted off to sleep, utterly exhausted by his days of fast travel and his fight with Black Hawk.

IN THE MORNING, hands tied behind his back, he was forced to march with Black Hawk back toward the Mississippi. The four Indians moved at a fast, silent pace that fairly ate up the distance. Jared was hard pressed to keep up with them and he knew that if he faltered or lagged, a hatchet in the head would end him.

By nightfall Jared dropped exhausted when at last Black Hawk signalled camp. The Indians paid Jared little attention, building a small fire and instantly curling up for sleep. One man acted as guard. Despite his hunger, Jared dropped off into a deep slumber.

Black Hawk himself awakened Jared the next morning and gave him a handful of pemmican for breakfast. In a few moments the band was again on the trail, heading steadily eastward. Jared knew Black Hawk was eager to return to his band and learn of their success under Killen's generalship. On the third day they came to the camp, less than a mile from the river.

Instantly, Jared noticed the armed white men who mingled freely with the Indians. He placed them as Irregulars sent from Detroit, or as renegade whites who had joined the Sacs for the sake of loot. Mart Killen was in the crowd that greeted Black Hawk and his eyes widened in surprise when he saw Jared. His thick lips parted in a triumphant grin.

"Lumme, would ye look who's come!" he exclaimed. He chuckled and the sound wasn't pleasant. "I'll see ye get the best handling the Sacs can give. They're right expert carving a man up while he's still alive."

Black Hawk cut in with swift questions and Mart's chest expanded in pride. "We done surprised the Americans and whipped 'em back down the river. Killed a heap and ye have some new scalps, Black Hawk."

"Massacre!" Jared gritted.

Killen grinned with evil knowing. He nodded. "Ye might call it that, bucko. And they'll come back just r'aring to get some Injuns. See what we'll have waiting for them!"

He stepped to one side and pointed down the row of rude tepees and tents. Jared's eyes widened when he saw the small cannon. At close range it would be deadly when filled with scrap metal, and Killen intended to use it at close range, setting a trap for the soldiers who would return for vengeance. Black Hawk strode to the cannon and placed his hand on the metal. A look of exultation passed across his face and he raised the war cry of the Sacs. It was answered by every Indian in the camp.

Jared was led to a tepee and rudely thrust inside. His bonds were cut but an Indian squatted just outside the door. Jared paced around in the small confines of the tepee. He knew what was coming. Black Hawk and Killen would plan their next step with diabolical cunning. Jared knew that the American commander ambushed and defeated, would not rest until he had wiped the memory of it out in a battle with the Sacs. But Black Hawk, the cannon hidden and ready, the ambush set at the place of his own choosing, could create havoc with the new expedition.

Jared stared out the opening of the tepee and the warrior glared stolidly back at him. Jared hardly considered what might happen to him. He had to escape and had to get warning to the Americans. The day slowly waned and the cooking fires were lit. Just after dark Jared heard guttural commands and he arose from the pallet of furs. Men crowded into the tepee, Black Hawk and Mart Killen leading them. A warrior held high a smoking torch.

Killen's wide grin goaded Jared. Black Hawk impassively considered his prisoner and there was a gleam in the eyes of the others that boded Jared no good. He knew what was to come and only his quick wits would save him.

"I am Black Hawk's prisoner," he said before the chief could speak, "but I am a man and a warrior. Black Hawk may do with me as Black Hawk wishes, but as a man I ask a favor."

The Indians glanced at one another. Jared continued, speaking fast.

"Black Hawk has with him a white woman who has the appearance of a man. He is a liar and a thief, one who speaks with a double tongue. He is a coward who had refused to meet me in battle, hiding behind the power of Black Hawk. I challenge him now and Black Hawk shall judge. Then I give myself to Black Hawk."

VIII

THERE WAS a deep silence. Mart Killen's grin vanished and he took an angry step toward Jared, his hand dropping to the tomahawk in his belt. Jared stood his ground and Black Hawk's brawny arm checked Killen. The chief studied the British trader, judging and weighing him. Then he turned to Jared.

"This man," he said slowly, "is truly a warrior. He fought with Black Hawk himself and nearly won. He is unarmed and no one kills him but the Sacs and Black Hawk."

"It's a trick," Killen choked. Black Hawk's brows arched high.

"He is a woman," Jared cut in, "and his father was a woman. He is of water and sand. If I lie, let him meet me before Black Hawk and his warriors. Let them decide!"

The Indian grunted with approval and looked at Mart Killen. The renegade trader's anger fumed and bubbled over. He cursed but that gained him nothing. The Sacs waited for his answer and Killen knew exactly what passed through their minds. Jared had neatly trapped him. He must face Jared in personal combat or be forever marked as a coward, his influence with Black Hawk and his warriors at an end. There was no way out and further argument would only build up suspicion in Black Hawk's mind. At last Killen jerked his thumb toward the door.

"Let us meet now!"

Once more the grunts of approval went around the circle and the black, glittering eyes turned to Jared. Killen had thrown the challenge right back at Jared, gaining

a slight advantage. Jared still felt the strain of the long, fast march from Keokuk's village. But there was only one thing to say.

"I accept."

Instantly he was herded through the tepee entrance and word swiftly sped through the camp. A ring of silent, watching warriors formed around two blazing fires Mart and Jared faced one another on the packed, hard ground between them. At Black Hawk's orders, Jared was given a long, gleaming knife and a tomahawk. Killen, similarly armed, tested the balance and weight of the hatchet. The Sacs moved back, leaving the rude arena cleared for the two men.

Killen still hefted the hatchet and his beady eyes narrowly watched Jared. His body looked squat and powerful in the firelight. Jared stood straight and tall but the advantage of weight rested with Killen.

The renegade made his first bid with treacherous suddenness. His tomahawk came streaking toward Jared and Killen himself lunged forward, knife held for the deadly upward thrust that would end the fight if the hatchet did not find its mark. Jared deflected the hatchet against his own tomahawk, dropped the weapon and skillfully side-stepped Killen's rush and cut.

Instantly Killen whirled, knife slashing toward Jared's eyes, his free hand reaching to talon onto Jared's shirt and pull him close. Once more Jared dodged the cut. He caught Killen's wrist and jerked, hard. Killen's own momentum sent him stumbling past Jared, who used his foot to tangle the trader's legs. Killen fell sprawling face down in the dust and Jared moved away. A murmur swept the ring of Indians and one of the Irregulars yelled in raucous anger.

"Give him yer blade, Mart! Take his skelp!"

Killen had twisted around the moment he fell, expecting that Jared would throw himself on his back. Jared waited, glad of the few seconds' respite and rest. Killen came slowly to his feet and started to circle watching for a chance to dart in and come to close quarters with his knife. Jared turned to meet him and for a moment the two fighters revolved slowly about each other. Firelight played on the intent, glittering eyes of the Indians.

Killen suddenly plowed forward and Jared side-stepped again. But Killen expected that move and he whirled with the speed of a striking snake. His fingers sank into Jared's shirt and his knife gleamed high. Jared caught it with his free hand, striking upward with his own blade, and Killen caught his wrist.

They stood chest to chest, Killen glaring directly into Jared's eyes. Their muscles bunched to the strain as each man sought to hold the other's knife wrist. This was the very thing Jared had hoped to avoid. For a sheer test of bull strength, Killen was bound to be the winner sooner or later. Jared felt his arm quiver as Killen's mighty muscles bunched and his blade slowly moved toward Jared's chest. It came inexorably closer and Jared felt the sudden drain of the swift, fatiguing travel.

JARED placed his foot behind Killen's ankle and threw his full weight forward. Killen tumbled backward, his hand still gripping Jared, who tried to wrench free. But Killen dragged him down and Jared's fingers slipped from the renegade's knife wrist. Instantly Killen slashed sending a deep cut across Jared's arm. As they hit, Killen's grip was broken and Jared rolled frantically, doubling up his legs to spring to his feet.

He twisted around as Killen grabbed wildly for him. His fingers slid along Jared's torso, seeking for a hold, and then Jared was free. Only for a moment. Killen came at a crouching lunge and the two men fell, rolling toward one of the fires. The Indians gave ground swiftly. The two men landed at the very edge of the fire, Killen on top.

His eyes glittered and he started, using his superior weight, to edge Jared's head closer and closer to the hot embers. Jared felt the heat of them and he desperately tried to break free. Killen held him and edged him a fraction of an inch closer. Jared arched his body high, calling on the last reserve of strength, throwing himself to one side.

Killen saw himself falling toward the flames. He forgot Jared and his arms shot out to check his fall. His hands landed in the hot coals, his knife blade pointing upward. He screamed with agony but the blade buried itself deep in his chest.

Jared grabbed Killen's legs and jerked him free of the flames but the smell of singed hair, cloth and flesh was heavy in the air. Killen did not move and Jared rolled him over. Killen's own knife was buried to the hilt in his chest. He had died instantly.

SHAKEN, quivering in every muscle from sheer fatigue, Jared came to his feet, and looked around the ring of Indians. He moved toward Black Hawk, stumbling a little.

"Black Hawk can do now as he wishes to me," Jared said.

The chief eyed Jared from head to toe and then his shoulders squared back. He lifted a medallion from around his neck, an honor given to him by the British at Malden.

"Black Hawk has met a brave man—and there are few of them among the Americans. Black Hawk gives this mark as a sign to the Sacs that you are safe with us."

Jared stared at the Indian as Black Hawk passed the ribbon over his head and stepped back. He caught his breath. "I'm no longer a prisoner?" he demanded.

Black Hawk smiled thinly. "No, but Black Hawk can read his warrior-brother's mind. You would warn the Americans and they will avoid the trap that Black Hawk sets for them. Warriors will take you southward to St. Louis. There you will be freed and your weapons returned. It will be too late then for you to spread the warning. Black Hawk will have won and the battle will be over."

He shoved out his hand in a gesture of peace and friendship. Jared realized that he had been granted the highest honor Black Hawk could confer, the chief's own personal regard and the medallion that would be a token of safety in all the villages of the Sacs and Foxes. Jared did not take the chief's hand for a moment.

"I am an American warrior," he stated. "I will attempt to warn my people. I will try to escape. Otherwise, Black Hawk and I are friends and there shall be no more war between us."

Black Hawk's high brows drew down as he frowned. Then he thrust his hand out further. "That is a man's talk and Black Hawk understands. Escape if you can. You will leave for St. Louis in the morning."

Jared accepted the chief's hand and the two men looked deep in one another's eyes. At a sign from Black Hawk, Jared was taken back to his tepee, his knife removed and a guard placed before his tent. He sank wearily down on the pallet of furs.

Killen was gone, that at least was accomplished. If the war would end with the British defeated, Jared knew that he could once again set up his post and trade in peace with the Indians. Mart Killen would never again use his sly, treacherous practices to turn the tribes against Jared. But now there was the war, and the matter of the American expedition that Black Hawk planned to ambush. Jared dropped to sleep, before he knew it, his mind going suddenly blank in slumber.

Morning came and Jared took his leave of Black Hawk. Five Sacs started southward, Jared unarmed in their midst. They cut away from the river, evidently to make sure they would not blunder accidentally upon an American patrol. The Indians were friendly enough, but they allowed Jared no chance of escape.

At night, one of the Sacs lashed Jared's wrist to his own with a rawhide thong and the rest rolled up in their blankets close around him. He could not move a step in any direction without awakening one of the warriors.

For a long time he lay staring up at the stars, worried, his mind toying with a hundred ideas of escape. But he had to reject all of them. The Americans would be coming upstream in search of Black Hawk. They would walk unknowingly into a death trap and Jared Crandall was helpless to warn them. He moved restlessly and instantly one of the Sacs sat up, looked at him, and then lay down again. Jared resigned himself to the fact that escape tonight was impossible. He gradually drifted off to sleep.

The Indians were awake at dawn. Two of them left the camp and came back with some small game. They built a fire, ate, giving Jared the choicest bits of squirrel and rabbit. Black Hawk's medallion around Jared's neck glittered in the morning sun, the King's likeness seeming to mock him. Jared's lips pressed in a bloodless thin line.

Somehow he was going to escape—today—if it cost him his life. He would at least make an effort to save the Americans from disaster.

IX

DESPITE his intentions, the morning passed with no single instant when the Sacs were not watching him. They took to the trail as soon as they finished eating and started southwestward again, angling farther and farther from the river. Jared knew that soon he would be too far from the Mississippi to intercept the American forces.

Just after the sun had passed the meridian, the little band plunged into a forest, leaving the more or less open country that rolled gently down to the river. Even now the Sac warriors seemed less worried about Jared's escape and every mile made his job more difficult. The line spread out, two Sacs in front, then Jared, and three followed behind. The distance between them widened, though at no time was the leading warrior out of sight of the man who brought up the rear.

Jared eyed the trees and the narrow paths that wound between them that seemed to beckon in mockery. Now and then a branch swept low so that Jared could almost reach up and touch them. Suddenly Jared's eyes widened as an idea struck him. It would take split-second timing and more than its share of luck and bluff. Unconsciously, his shoulders hunched forward as he tensed himself for the attempt.

HE SAW another of the low limbs a few feet off to his right. Without warning, Jared suddenly darted from the line and raced away. Instantly the Sacs yelled warning to those ahead and sped after Jared. They bunched close behind him. The low limb was not far ahead and Jared spurted onward. He leapt upward, his long arms reaching out for the limb.

He caught it, swung forward, lifted his legs and swung back. His moccasined feet caught the leading Sac hard in the pit of his stomach. The Indian doubled over like a broken stick, but he also went flying backward into the others. They reeled every which way under the impact—and Jared dropped to race off toward the river.

He was well ahead by the time the Indians had disentangled themselves. They started in pursuit, racing at first to overtake him. Jared strained every muscle to keep ahead. Gradually the line of pursuers lengthened, one buck pressing close on Jared's heels. They did not attempt to use their arrows or tomahawks or the musket that one man carried.

Jared plunged on, drawing out the last of his energy. The one buck came closer. Abruptly, Jared halted and swung on his heel. The Sac could not check himself and Jared's fist flashed up. It caught the man flush in the face and he went down. Jared grabbed his tomahawk and straightened, wheeling.

The others were coming up fast. Jared swung the hatchet as he had learned long ago to do. It flew through the air and the flat of its blade hit the leading runner on the head. He tumbled to the ground.

The remaining two Sacs attempted to skid to a halt, suddenly perceiving how their numbers had been reduced. But Jared was quick to follow up his advantage.

He came hurtling at them, his voice raised in a wild bellow. The man with the musket tried to dodge to one side and collided with the other. Jared charged into him, and all three went down.

But Jared was first up, and with him came the musket. Once, twice he swung it, gripping it by the barrel. It was all that was needed to add two more senseless Indians to those already sleeping soundly in the glade.

Breathing heavily, then, Jared Crandall turned around until he faced East.

MAJOR ZACHARY TAYLOR surveyed his soldiers thoughtfully. His piercing gaze swept over tattered uniforms and plain homespun, over trail-worn footgear and the increasing number of bandaged feet, over gaunt faces and sagging shoulders.

His problem was whether to attack. This forced march had taken much out of his men, he knew. But victory seemed within his grasp for the taking.

Scouts had reported a Sac village but a few miles ahead, which by its very size could only be Black Hawk's. To take that village would right many a wrong and help to erase the bitter memories of defeat.

Yet something was wrong, he sensed. It was not like a Sac chief, whose own scouts must have apprised him of the approaching Americans, to leave a village,

least of all his own, so helplessly in their path. Major Taylor had heard of Indian trickery, and of ambuscades, but it was unusual—nay, costly—to bait a trap with a village that, acording to his scouts, still harbored Indian life. It was a trick that could be turned too easily against the trickster.

He straightened. He had come to a decision. He opened his mouth to rasp forth the order to march on the village.

And then his attention was diverted. Two of his men approached. Between them stalked a man who bore every evidence of extreme exhaustion, yet managed to bear himself like the frontiersman he so obviously was.

The man strode straight to him, ignoring an aide who sought to intercept him. "Are you in command here?" he demanded.

"Major Zachary Taylor, sir," growled the commander. "Who are you?"

"I am Jared Crandall. I have come to warn you against attacking yon Indian village. It's a trap."

"Hah," barked Major Taylor. "How?"

"They have a cannon."

"What! Nonsense, sir. Whoever heard of Indians with cannon?"

Patiently, then, Jared told his story. The commander's face grew grave. When Jared had finished, he said, "Then we cannot attack. We will only be decimated—and the retreat harassed."

"Aye, but if you stop to think, Major Taylor, there's a way around that."

"What is it?"

"Split your forces. Have them attack simultaneously from opposite sides. Knowing about the cannon, whichever party sees it aimed its way can throw itself flat on the ground and—"

"And the other party can close in. The first party can close in between cannon-loadings, or in case the Indians try to turn the piece about. By thunder," exclaimed the major, "you've got it!"

Wheeling, he began to shout orders. Wearily, the encampment came to life. Companies reformed — and some began marching off. Major Taylor turned back to Jared Crandall.

"Some have dropped out," he said slowly, "along the line. And so there is a musket for you, should you be caring to use it. Although you seem more weary, even, than my own men—?"

Jared gazed sadly at the man, and it seemed as if he did not really see the other. "It is not for weariness, although I have been severely used these last few days. My reason for not joining you must seem strange.

"Black Hawk is now my friend. He became my friend but yesterday." Jared thoughtfully fingered the medallion for a moment. "I gave him fair warning that I would try to escape and warn you. But I did not say to him that I would fight against him.

"The Sacs are my friends, although many of them still do not believe so. I have done what I have done, for my country. Surely, you do not need me now. Victory will be yours."

"I am certain of it," responded Major Taylor warmly, stepping forward. "Your hand, sir."

The two men shook hands firmly. And then Jared Crandall was gone.

FOR MANY MILES he loped on, tirelessly now. He had rested and hunted well. Besides, he was going home, to Marta.

Yet his heart was a little heavy. Still sharp in his ears were the sounds he had heard when only a few miles from the encampment. It had brought him to a dead stop, that distant rattle of musketry.

He had stiffened with the dull reverberating boom of the cannon. He had listened while the muskets rattled on. But the cannon had boomed no more. Black Hawk's last strategy had gone down in defeat.

Sadly, he had taken up the trail once more. It had to be, he reckoned. For greed and empire, the red man had been aroused falsely against his paler brother. He wondered whether the way out would always have to be through the other's blood.

Yet with each step the burden grew lighter. For at the end of this trail was one whose love and laughter could wipe out all suffering.

With Marta, now, life was beginning all over . . .

The whole town saw Miller topple from his horse . . .

Here Comes JESSE JAMES!

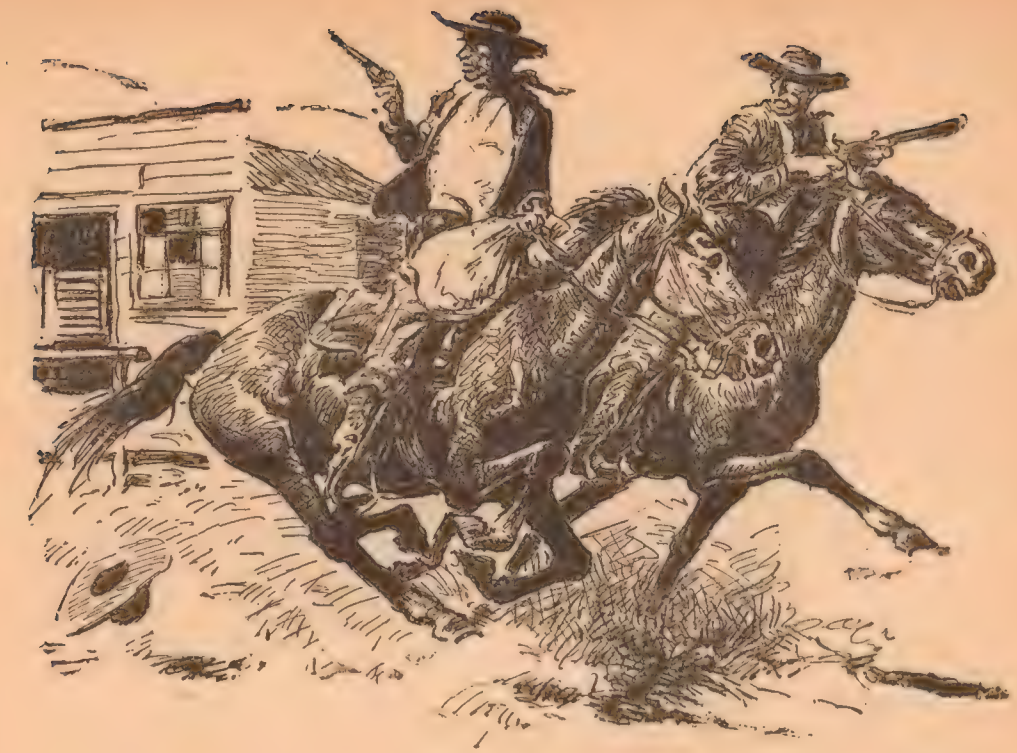
By BUCK RINGOE

DEAD men and cripples were strewn in their wake like milestones. They reached from Minnesota to the Texas Border, from Kentucky's wooded hills to the mining camps of bleak Nevada. It was, "Here they come!" and "There they go!" North, east, south and west, their trail of robbery and murder spread like a pestilence over the raw western frontier of a half-century ago.

"It's the James Boys!" The cry would ring out on the warm, sunny air of a tiny border town. Women, grim-faced and careworn, snatched their children from the streets and dragged them to the precarious safety of the flimsy houses. Men, caught unawares, unarmed, raced for shelter or for weapons. Storekeepers burrowed down behind their counters groping with trembling hands for shotguns. While into the dusty street came the mounted hellions.

With foam-flecked horses and their guns blazing the way, the infamous James Gang swept down on their prey—a band of ruthless renegades who terrorized the west from the close of the Civil War to 1882 when the notorious Jesse, leader of the gang, died at the muzzle of his own pistol in the hands of a reward hunter.

For almost twenty years the James brothers, Frank and Jesse, organizers of the worst bunch of cut-throats and thieves the country has ever known, led the law a merry chase from state to state, striking with the sudden swift deadliness of a nest of rattlesnakes, and darting away with their blood-spattered loot to fade from sight like will-o'-the-wisps. With them rode the Youngers, four brothers—Cole, Bob, Jim and John.



Twenty-five years along the loot-and-shoot trail—twenty-five years of hot lead versus cold blood . . . and what did he have but a price on his head that was too high—for him to live!

The James boys and the Youngers were cousins and, off and on, from year to year, their lawless bunch ranged from six to twenty picked horses, the personnel including Dick Little, Charley Pitts, Clell Miller, Bill Chadwell, Commanche Tony, Bob Moore, Jim Reed, Jack Keen, Tom McDaniels, Hobbs Kerry, Johnny Berry, Dave Cummings, Patsy Martin and Big John Cameron.

Over a period of many years this gang of thieving killers operated from a headquarters located in a secret cave hidden away in the fastness of the Hole-in-the-Wall country in Jackson County, Missouri.

Fortified here by the very nature of the land itself and the fact that the gang rode the best horses they could find and were able to lose their pursuers time and again, Jesse's companions escaped death at the hands of many posses and holed up to nurse their wounds and split their ill-gotten wealth.

It was here, too, that the James boys and the Younger brothers laid their plans for raids on banks, for sticking up trains, and the hundreds of crimes against society for which the law snapped year after year on their heels. There was nothing at which they did not try their gun-filled hands; no prize too large, none too small, from the wrecking of a gold-laden train to the murder of a Mexican gambler.

Outlawry was their trade and death their ally. The name of Jesse, the wiliest and cruelest of the two brothers, has been handed down in song and story through generations. His name was a synonym for terror with which mothers frightened their children in those days of strife and struggle when the west was new.

From the wild, fierce days of conflict, which was the great war between the North and South, this creature without a conscience sprang into his ill-fame as the leader of killers. How many men he or

his followers sent to death will never be known, but Jesse himself started in a bloody school.

HE was a mere boy when he mounted a horse and fled from his home in Clay County, Missouri, to join the guerrillas under the leadership of that dashing scoundrel, Charles William Quantrell. This was in 1862, the second year of the brother-against-brother conflict, and young Jesse was twelve years old. Tall and strong, with a fierce courage that was almost madness, this child rode, stirrup to stirrup, with the free-booter Quantrell for two years of bloody raiding across the border states, until Quantrell fell in a frightful holocaust of bullets and sabers.

From this carnage of revenge by Federal troops Jesse James escaped with his life. His brother Frank had, strangely enough, been absent on a visit home. Quantrell was dead; the black flag was down. The James boys retired to the now newly peaceful Missouri hills — and planned together the second long chapter in their lives of murder and plunder.

They were not outlawed by chance or circumstance. It was by choice that the James Boys rode the gauntlet of the law, and in the end, with a price on his head, Jesse James crumpled under the thud and smash of a bullet inspired by gain.

"Alive or dead!" The word went out. Notices were posted across a score of states. Banks and express companies joined hands. Ten thousand dollars reward for Jesse James! And when the men of the badge and the law-gun failed to run him down there appeared a fellow named Robert Johnson, who proved really to be Robert Ford. He was Jesse's own cousin, and he waited for his chance.

SHOOTING right and left they came with reckless guns thundering their startling warning to the scurrying citizens of Gallatin, Missouri. This was a cold December day in '69, and beneath the leaden, gray sky the surprised townspeople dashed for cover as the James Gang, armed to the teeth and mounted on fast horses, hammered down the little street of the Davis County town in a beeline for the Gallatin bank.

At the door of the brave little institution the horses swept to a halt in a cloud of dust. Two men leaped from saddles and tossed their bridle reins to companions. These two men were Jesse James and Cole Younger, and into the bank they went, guns cocked and ready for murder.

Outside, before the windows, pranced the others of the gang, six-shooters and rifles in hand, covering the citizens and the store fronts across the street. Inside the walls of the bank a pair of ruthless desperadoes looked over pistol barrels into the surprised eyes of Captain John W. Sheets, cashier.

"Hand over the keys—quick," snapped Jesse James. "Quick—or you'll drown in your own blood."

There was no question but that this vicious outlaw meant it and Sheets, realizing his helplessness, also the fact that the safe was already open, handed the keys across.

Like a pair of hungry wolves the outlaws leaped for the safe and flung wide the door. Swift hands, hardened and calloused by the grips of death-dealing guns, swept the loot into a handy sack. Then the vicious Jesse, with neither word or reason, fired a bullet into Captain Sheets' brain. The shot rang out and crashed the tomb-like silence of the building. Sheets stumbled blindly, fell sprawling on his face, dead. And out of the bank ran Jesse and his partner to fling themselves into waiting saddles and race away with their companions and their booty.

The haul was a miserable seven hundred dollars, so history tells us, but the crime was heinous; an atrocious downright murder for the cashier had not so much as moved to block the theft.

A posse quickly formed and made after the fleeing killers. But James and his gang rode the citizens ragged, being mounted on horses that covered ground like the very wind. Shots were exchanged and the country curry-combed by a hundred maddened Missourians, but it was no use. It proved the same old story. Another clean getaway by the James boys.

WORD of this latest crime was carried to the four points of the compass. In every county sheriffs and their deputies dragged the hills and the brakes seeking a clue to the whereabouts of Jesse James and the Youngers. And through the cor-

dons of the law they slipped, like weasels in the night, to disappear completely.

Cunning as a wolf, Jesse then led his band in other channels. From bank hold-ups they turned to cracking the trains, to sticking-up a stage-coach on a lonely mountain trail, or sweeping down suddenly on some small town to raid the principal store.

For a year and more the gang led the law a wild chase, dropping clues over an area thousands of miles square, until, far away, hundreds of miles from the scene of the murder at Gallatin, in the very heart of Kentucky, the James gang struck once more.

Swooping down with their belching guns they thundered into the town of Columbia, Adair County. Bullets drove the townsmen into their homes. The street was swiftly deserted. Only the bristling guns of the James killers gleamed in the sunlight from sweat stained saddles.

With fiendish calm Jesse and two of his killers strode through the bank doors and presented themselves at a moment when the president and his cashier were first aware that something was amiss outside in the town.

The three bandits faced the bankers. Six black-muzzled guns were leveled with hammers cocked. With cool deliberation Jesse led his mates around behind the counter.

"Don't get excited," he warned the horror-bound bankers. "Stand still."

Old Tom Martin, the cashier, opened his mouth to protest. Jesse James made a gesture with his pistol.

"Keep quiet!" he snarled at Martin. "Just hand over the keys to your vault!"

Jesse's pistol was aiming at the brain of the cold cashier and the courageous Martin swore heartily, cursing the outlaw for the preposterousness of the idea. A Kentuckian quitting to a highway robber, a wanted man.

"To hell with you!" shouted Martin. "I'll do nothing of the kind."

And Jesse's pistol cracked like the falling of the sky. The slug crashed through Martin's brain and the banker watched with fear-stricken gaze as the old man fell dead in front of him. A few clerks, frozen with numbing paralysis, poised spellbound as Jesse leaped across the murdered cashier and secured the keys.

But alas! the keys were only half they needed. A combination came first. Old Martin's shattered brain held that secret of the vault. James and his companions raged and swore, gathering up the miserly few dollars they could reach. Then, with a final parting volley of reckless gun-fire, they mounted and rode out of Columbia to the security of the Kentucky mountains screened by the heavily wooded trails.

ALL of the country was again up in arms. Posses were re-organized. Citizens started out determined to corner the outlaw gang and shoot it out with them, to bring them in alive or kill them one and all.

Frank James, however, was born and raised in Kentucky. In Scott County, to be exact. He knew the rough wooded land like one of its own skulking black bears and it was Frank who led the gang in a wild break eluding the surrounding guns of the enraged citizenry. There were even those who claimed that friends aided the James boys and their gang in escaping the net that posses tightened about them.

At any rate the gang broke through. Miles away, on the shore of the Mississippi, Jesse brought the hard riding bunch to a halt.

"We'll sneak across," he told them under cover of the night and the woods that masked their panting mounts, "and lay low for a while. Maybe we can stop an overland stage 'r so, but we'll head for the cave."

Hiding by day in the hills and draws, the gang rode for Jackson County, their Missouri hide-out in the Hole-in-the-Wall. To do this successfully they were forced to split up, as they had often done before. Jesse and his brother Frank paired off; two of the Younger brothers—then two more. Bill Chadwell, whose alias was Bill Styles, usually stuck close to Miller and Pitts, a lawless trio.

A hundred miles or so separated the various units of the gang when Jesse and Frank ran into trouble in the form of a sheriff's party who recognized them.

"This way," shouted Frank, the older of the brothers. "Jesse! We gotta ride for it!"

The shining star of the lawman glinted in the light of early day. The James Boys had ridden too far into the dawn. Swerv-

ing their horses, they drove in spurs and pounded the prairie at a fierce pace, shooting desperately behind them to keep the pursuers off their heels. The chase was hot, however, and the direction bore the James boys ever westward. Several times they dodged death by narrow margins as the singing slugs winged past their ears.

At last, with blowing horses and the evening shadows spreading wide from the hills, the leaders of the James gang halted to take stock. Behind them, somewhere in the gloom of the broken country, the sheriff and his men searched fruitlessly for the ragged end of a tangled trail. The fox had again slipped through the trap.

"We'll let 'em cool off, Frank," suggested Jesse. "The bunch'll get to the cave, but we'll keep goin'. I got a hankerin' to see what Nevada looks like. They say there's plenty there for the taking."

Frank James agreed readily to this. They would hit the trail to Nevada, maybe take a little *pasear* down to Mexico after a while.

Whatever hand of fate or chance led the two James boys into the high Sierras is not know today, but the fact remains that, in the fall of '72, Jesse and Frank sat one night in a dive of the mining camp known as Battle Mountain.

SOMEONE is shuffling a deck of cards. A score of two of hard-faced men lounge in chairs, lean on the bar in the smoke-filled whiskey-scented saloon. Stacks of chips tower at the elbows of five men at a table. Furtive eyes watch, the dealer flips the pasteboards; one, two, three, four —himself. A couple of chips are tossed, a player speaks in a low monotone. Someone passes. Another hurls his chips beside the first. The dealer stirs. Around the table moves the play.

Then a player stiffens, moves back his chair. A word is flung. The player has become a friend of Jesse James. A rough hard-bitten uncouth miner with a pouch of glittering dust. Gleaming eyes stare and a man makes a swift move for a pistol in his boot.

C-rash! Jesse's gun is in his hand and smoking. The fumbler at the boot has gone to hell. Crumpling like an emptied sack, he topples to the floor and Battle Mountain is rocking with the booming thunder of blazing, hammering sixshooters.

Blood-thirsty howls of anger fill the smoky place. Friends take sides. The shooting is frantic, wild. Jesse and Frank James back toward the door, blazing guns spitting death from their steady fists. The bodies of men go sprawling in the swift agony of torment and, with a volley from the doorway, the James boys leap clear.

Down the hill they run, avengers' bullets whining around them. The slip and scrape of heavy boots comes after them. Running miners bellowing to the night skies are on their trail. Then in a little fort of rock the two James Boys halt and block the way. Lead screams and whistles through the canyon. Foolhardy grubbers for gold pay the penalty for rashness with their lives.

"Get back, damn you," shouts Jesse James savagely.

In answer a half dozen frenzied hillmen rush the pair and the two James boys take deadly aim. One, two—three—four! Down they go in their tracks, while Jesse straightens his hat on his head and swears as he feels the hole where a miner's bullet just missed his skull.

This was Nevada in the Seventies. The James Boys then hit the trail and headed for California, but on their way they paused long enough to stick up the stage in Sulphur Vale where they collected about $4,000 in jewels and gold from the express box.

Then followed the robbery of the Concord stage and away went the bandits. Never a scratch to mar their lean-jawed brutal faces. For months they were swallowed up in mystery. What became of them?

No one knew the answer. Only the Mexicans below the border. Down in Matamoras amid the swarthy-skinned caballeros and the flashing-eyed maidens the two James boys, Jesse and Frank, revelled with stolen gold. There they shot their way into and out of a rattling gun fight with the natives at a big fandango and were forced to ride for their lives, leaving a dozen men dead.

However, they did not go scott free this time. At a border town called Concepcion they slid from bloody saddles and laid over to repair their wounds. Both of them nursed a seething hatred for the Mexi-

cans now and when they were well enough to hit the trail again and found themselves on the outskirts of a tiny hamlet known as Carmen, Frank suggested that they stop and take a look around.

"Mebbe there'll be something interesting," he said to Jesse.

"Like what?" demanded the cold-eyed younger brother.

"Oh, like—well, you know, Jesse, how these Mex handle gold."

Jesse approved the idea and they halted in Carmen, which is situated in the state of Chihuahua. Here the two bandits got word of a pack train of silver bullion coming through from Chihuahua City. Recruiting a trio of hombres equally as tough as themselves, the five waited for the arrival of the Mexicans with their laden mules.

It was Jesse James who played the fox, who made the overtures to the leader of the train-guard and offered to ride across the border with them and help protect the fortune in silver. And it was Jesse, who, when they had reached a suitable lonely spot on the trail, put the guns to the guards and blew their brains out.

The rest was easy. Leading the mules loaded with their bloodied plunder back into Texas, the James boys swapped for cash and left for parts unknown.

FOR several years the desperadoes ran riot like a pack of spectre wolves riding the night winds. They seemed charmed as far as bullets were concerned and worked with such surprise and speed that their victims were invariably caught completely unawares.

Back again in their old haunts, back into their great cave in the Hole-in-the-Wall region, Jesse and Frank called in the others of the band. From far and wide came the Youngers, Chadwell, Moore, Pitt and the rest.

"A big plan," explained Jesse, who by now was admitted the real chief of operation. "Here, here and here."

He pointed with a gun muzzle to a map. Like a field marshal he outlined his method of attack, explained the strategy that would make success easy, would defeat the law-bringers.

"St. Genevieve first," said Jesse with a grim smile. "Nice peaceful little town. We will do a good business. And—as usual—they won't be expectin' us."

There was hardly a grain of humor in any of the James family. Least of all in Jesse. But he felt a certain sort of relish in the victories he counted and the slick, smooth way he planned his raids. This one was going to be a sort of garden party.

St. Genevieve was a tiny, quaint old Catholic town in Missouri. This was—the day they fell on it with their guns and plunder sacks—the 27th of May, 1873. Springtime. The James boys were far from the thoughts of the citizens of St. Genevieve on such a day. And especially surprised were O. D. Harris, cashier of the bank, and young Forman A. Rozier, son of the institution's president.

Harris was first. He opened the door of the building and—came face to face with a quartet of heavily-armed men.

"Come right in," ordered the tall sharp-eyed Jesse James, with a menacing motion of his guns covering both men. "We're here to help you out—with the money."

Cashier Harris knew that to cross these men meant instant death. Young Rozier, mad clear through, made a half move to turn, and one of the Youngers rammed a pistol into his ribs.

"Don't try any o' that," snarled the bandit. "Come in quiet and keep quiet, 'r we'll spatter your brains out right here."

In the face of such dire threats both men did as they were bid. Harris was pushed forward toward the safe.

"Open it quick!" demanded Jesse. "An', damn you, if you waste any time, I'll put you where time won't mean anything."

"Very well," answered Harris, beginning on the combination. All eyes followed his movements for a single moment. Just the instant it takes for a man to make up his mind and act. That instant young Rozier risked his life. With a wild leap he sprang for the door and down the steps into the street.

Outlaw guns blazed behind him and bullets shrilled in his ears. But Rozier caught himself as a leaden ball tugged at his shoulder and he went on shouting the alarm to the housetops. St. Genevieve came alive like a hornet's nest but, through a storm of wild-flung lead, the James gang made its escape with $70,000 in loot.

Free and in the open, they snaked the

posse off their trail and were lost. Then, before they had time to spend this bulky plunder, the gang, with Jesse always the guiding star, appeared silently one night about fourteen miles east of Council Bluffs, Iowa, and held up a train.

GRIM and ruthless they waited in the dark beside the track. The band included the James brothers, the Youngers, Bob Moore and a renegade from Texas, called Comanche Tony. At three o'clock the train was due to pass their hide-out. They had ties piled on the rails.

Back through the night came the shrill, weird blast of the whistle, and out of the blackness roared the train. There was a sharp scream of brakes, a thundering crash and over went the engine, killing the engineer. Immediately bedlam broke loose as the gang rushed out, firing at windows of the train, sending their bullets through the glass and yelling like devils until every last man aboard was cowering in fear of death.

Then, behind smoking guns, the James gang ransacked the passengers, combing the train until they reached the express car. Here they encountered a brave messenger who attempted to hold them off. A bullet through this worthy expressman's arm broke it and put him out of the fight, leaving the outlaws free to take the $6,000 the safe contained.

All together their plunder netted them about $25,000 with which they rode off and again melted from sight like shadows that vanish in the dark of night.

The railroads, express companies and banks now swelled the rewards until sheriffs, detectives from the East, police officers, and even soldiers of the regular army, were flocking to their trail.

Fifty thousand dollars was offered in all for the capture of the gang. All of it or any part for the body of Jesse James, alive or dead!

And only a month from the day on which these bandits had shot their way through St. Genevieve, with the reward hunters baffled by their mysterious disappearance, the notorious outlaw gang rode boldly into the town of Corydon, Iowa, in broad daylight, and rifled the vaults of the First National Bank there.

There is a story to the effect that Jesse James himself came nearer to capture or death right after this robbery than at any time during his career of crime to that date. The gang, it appears, had split up on its retreat from Corydon and Jesse found himself alone riding hell-for-leather out of the clutches of a small party of determined men.

These he finally eluded and, on the second day following, he was heading for the place of appointed rendezvous when he suddenly found that he was riding straight toward two well-armed men who were undoubtedly part of a scattered posse. Jesse quickly assumed the sleepy attitude of a country hick and nerved himself for the meeting.

Sharp eyes met his bucolic grin and the two men scanned his riding gear.

"Howdy folks," greeted Jesse James. "Nice weather we're havin'."

The two men agreed savagely that it was but asked him if he had by chance noticed anything of fleeing horsemen. The bank at Corydon had been robbed!

At the news Jesse appeared genuinely disturbed and wanted to know what the country was comin' to. After a few minutes desultory talk they parted, the possemen riding to make up time, Jesse James waited until they were out of sight behind a rise, then pouring the steel into his mount to put distance between himself and the region around Corydon.

It was a close shave for the Killer from Jackson County.

THE law of a dozen states was now on their heels. Proclamations were issued by the governors officially pronouncing the various members of the gang, and Jesse James especially, outlawed. Officers were told to "get them, no matter how." The newspapers of the early west printed columns about their daring deeds, the foul crimes which were attributed to the gang.

Friends of the James and Younger boys were loud in their denunciation of these edicts, and it was claimed by many that more than a few of the dastardly crimes checked against this gang were the acts of others who took advantage of the situation to throw a deeper shadow on the murderous records of the James clan. This may or may not be true. Enough, however, that Jesse James and his outlaw following

committed enough known murders and robberies to inflame the hearts of all law-abiding people with a righteous hatred for their very names.

To the James boys' gang is said to go the credit, or discredit, for being the first in outlawry to use dynamite in train robbery.

Their initial use of this persuasive "box opener" is recorded in the account of the hold-up of the Missouri Pacific which the James boys staged with lavish fireworks one August night in 1876.

A starry Missouri sky hung high overhead as the train neared Clayton. A short way behind them, near Samuels Station, Siever, the engineer, had his attention called by his fireman to a "bunch o' hosses that wuz racin' the train over to the left."

Siever shrugged and said something about some cows breaking loose from a herd. He was slowing down to stop at a siding for water, when the fireman again remarked that there was "something kinda movin' near them."

Suddenly a score of mounted men came out of the darkness of the brush along the track, flung themselves from saddle and, with glistening six-shooters, opened fire. Bullets thudded into the sides of the train. A couple of bandits climbed the locomotive with shouted threats.

Back at the express car a quartet of shadowy figures were at once shouting for the messenger, a fellow named Smith, to open up or take the worst of it. It so happened that this Smith had with him as companion the mail clerk who nourished Smith's sentiments toward the hold-ups. What these two told the men in the night outside was plenty. They could go to hell and warmer places, but the car would not be opened.

"We'll show you how we'll open it," came the shout outside from one of the James gang. "Get that dynamite over here, pardner."

The record goes on to tell of a man who stood by the horses. He came walking through the night with a dark package, and calmly smoking a cigarette.

Placing the charge, where by some strange knowledge they were sure the express safe stood, the fellow touched his cigarette to the fuse and—off it went. A deafening explosion shook the ground and the car. Splinters flew and a few of the outlaws roared in pain and rage.

Strangely enough neither of the men in the car were injured. They stood with upraised hands, knowing their slim chances on gunplay. Then it was seen that the dynamite had ruined the safe and all the robbers had to do was pry it apart and make off with more than twenty thousand dollars.

Jesse James was well pleased with the success of his dynamite hold-up. This new phase of train robbery opened up a way to untold wealth. But the hounds of the law were getting closer all the time now. Jesse and his wild bunch were forced to run from county to county and from state to state. They were continually on the dodge.

During their frequent sorties across county and state lines they found time to break the monotony of flight by holding up the Iron Mountain Express and making off with some $25,000. This action drew their trailers with firmer convictions to the railroad rights of way. The gang shrewdly figured that their pursuers would center their strength to guarding all trains crossing Missouri. And with this assumption Jesse James and his lawless legion planned the now famous raid on the Northfield (Minn.) Bank, September 7, 1876; the date is to this day remembered by the old-timers of that Minnesota city.

For that day a bloody carnage blotted the straggling street and men died in their boots.

OUT of the secret cave the James Gang rode north. It was Bill Chadwell, who first suggested Northfield. It was a sleepy little burg up over the line in Minnesota. Mostly Swedes. Easy picking. Chadwell came from Minnesota and knew the country. There was a bank in Northfield that was ripe for the breaking. Jesse had confidence in Bill Chadwell. Bill had, in his earlier days, been a famous horse thief and he knew the get-away trails up that way.

Desperate and prepared to shoot to kill, Jesse James realized the folly of riding all the way to Minnesota. In the face of possible recognition and capture the gang went by train instead. Alert every minute of the trip, they arrived near Northfield

the day before and prepared themselves by securing good horses.

Noon of the 7th saw three strangers eating lunch in a Northfield restaurant. After the meal the three led their horses straight across to the First National Bank where they halted and stood talking idly.

This was the signal. From across the bridge that spanned the Cannon River came the swift clatter of three horses. In the saddles sat hard-eyed, heavily armed strangers. And, as their mounts hit the dust of the street and swung toward the bank, another factor entered the scene. From the west two more horsemen appeared, riding furiously. Now both these parties, five riders in all, were shooting right and left, yelling savagely at the citizens who dived from the path of the plunging animals and the flaming guns.

One of the three at the door of the bank now spoke, coolly. He was tall and sinewy, and his black eyes flashed with the wild gleam of a wanton killer.

"That means us," he said and his voice was that of Jesse James. "Come on."

Into the bank he and his two companions strode, whipping out their holstered six-shooters. Without a pause Jesse, Bob Younger and Charlie Pitts jumped over the counters, waving their weapons.

J. L. Haywood, the cashier, flashed an angry glance toward them. Nearby were Frank Wilcox and A. E. Bunker, two of the bank clerks.

"Open 'er up," commanded Jesse James fiercely. "*You*—open up, savvy?"

Haywood stared at the outlaw leader, unafraid, challenging, and calmly shook his head. At this moment the fuming killer noticed that the door stood slightly ajar. He leaped toward the safe and flung back the door, only to find that there was a second one inside that would not budge as he stepped in and yanked. Haywood selected this moment to jump forward; a chance to shut the famed robber in.

But Charley Pitts stopped him with a clutching hand and threatening gun point. There was a quick scrape of feet, and Bunker, a nervy lad, made a break for the back door. With his move Bob Younger jumped and followed, driving a bullet after Bunker. Then another. Still Bunker went on—and out, one slug in his shoulder.

"Damn him!" yelled Jesse James, flinging himself on Haywood. "Quick, now!"

Haywood still refused to move and Pitts ripped out a knife and stuck it against the cashier's throat.

"Open 'er up, damn you," snarled Pitts, "or I'll slit you from ear to ear."

Again Haywood refused bluntly, courageously, perhaps foolishly. But, as he shook his head and the sharp knife drew a little blood, the gunfire in the street broke out like a raging tornado.

One of the outlaws came to the bank door and shouted for haste.

"It's gettin' hotter than hell out here," he cried. "Hurry up!"

Jesse James went berserk and flung himself at the safe, leaped to the shelves behind the cage, swept up all the small change he could find. The loot was shoved into a bag, and the three men made for the door. As Jesse cleared the counter he caught a movement of Haywood. Was the cashier going for a gun? Perhaps, but Jesse didn't wait to find out. He swung his six-gun about and smashed a bullet into Haywood's brain, killing him instantly.

IN the street now the scene was changed. Northfield had armed itself. The crack and boom of pistol and rifle made a bedlam of the early afternoon. The citizens had found weapons, and the bravest of them were making a valiant battle of it.

As Jesse James, Bob Younger and Pitts ran for their horses lead was screaming around them. Then they were mounted. Jesse shouted the signal for the run.

Bill Chadwell swung up to his saddle and moved directly into the path of a heavy slug from Dr. Wheeler's breech-loading carbine. The doctor was shooting from a corner room in the Dampier House. Bill Chadwell, alias Styles, slid from his plunging horse into the street.

A man named Bates was firing from a room above the store nearby, and his friend, Manning, stood recklessly right in the open street shooting fast in an effort to knock one from the saddle. But the robbers were on the run now, shouting directions, shooting wildly and trying to get their horses all going the same way. This was Manning's chance. He saw Clell Miller in the clear and slammed a bullet at him.

"Got him!" shouted Manning as the

whole town saw Miller topple from his horse and plunge into the street.

Cole Younger saw Miller fall, too, and, with a jerk at his reins, he swung his horse around and leaped down to unbuckle Miller's belt from which was hung a pair of pistols. Then, in the midst of the whistling slugs, Cole Younger scrambled into the saddle and found that his friends were still close by. The townspeople were driving them back.

"Bob," yelled Cole Younger as he saw his brother through the dust and smoke. "Get up and ride!"

Bob Younger had leaped from his saddle and was using his horse as a barricade, shooting across the saddle. He paid no heed to Cole's warnings, but kept on shooting, trying to find a mark, until one of Manning's slugs dropped his horse. Then Bob dodged backward toward an iron stairway and a pile of boxes. Shooting like a demon, he tried to get Manning, but in his eagerness and rage he failed to count on Dr. Wheeler.

Wheeler watched his chance, made an unsuccessful try to pick off Jesse James, who shot with cold-eyed calm, then the doctor went back and lined his sights on Bob Younger, putting a bullet through Younger's right elbow. Mad as a rattler, Bob grabbed his six-gun in his left hand and continued shooting until he saw one of his bullets plow a furrow through Bates' cheek.

"Run for it," came the shout of Jesse James now. "Get up and ride!"

Others followed him on the run. Jim Younger looked around for his horse. It was gone, and Jim screamed. "Boys, you ain't goin' to leave me?" he called. "I'm hurt bad!"

Cole Younger heard him and spun his horse around, grabbing Jim up behind him on the run. With the scattering final volley the outlaw bunch rode like mad men out of Northfield.

Eight rode in and six rode out. Of the six who escaped, every man of them carried marks of the fierce conflict. A hundred small-shot wounds told their story of the quick action by J. B. Hyde and L. Stacey who had no time to change loads for their shotguns.

Of the sextet Frank James and Jim Younger were the most seriously wounded. Yet, in spite of the wounded men and horses and the fast pursuit, the James Gang again escaped. By stealing horses and food, and by securing surgical aid at the point of the pistol, they managed to keep moving, fighting off a posse here and there, until they were lost entirely.

New rewards were now offered. The State of Minnesota posted first $1,000 for the arrest of the six bandits. This offer was soon changed to $1,000 for each of the six; dead or alive; $700 was put up by the Northfield Bank and another $500 by the Winona and St. Peter Railroad. A fortune in rewards waited for the man or men who brought in the bodies of the James Gang.

The day was coming, as it comes in the life of every wanted man. Who was to claim these riches?

THERE was no fanfare of trumpets or ruffle of drums the day that the famed Pinkerton Detective Agency in Chicago detailed three of its picked men to run down the James outlaw gang.

Detectives Allen, Wright and Daniels were the men assigned to this dangerous undertaking and they went at their work with a full knowledge of the risk they took.

Large rewards had again been offered by Governors Woodson of Missouri and Baxter of Arkansas. It was the American Express Company, however, who engaged the Pinkertons and, following the word that the James boys were in hiding at a place in St. Clair County, the trio of lawmen proceeded to pick up the clues.

Well mounted and armed, the three detectives were riding along a road between Roscoe and a place called Chalk Level. Wright was in front, alone; Allen and Daniels followed, side by side. They had passed the house of a man named Theodore Snuffer only a short distance when a noise behind them caused the two to turn their heads.

"Who are these?" asked Allen furtively of Daniels as they noted two mounted men approaching with menacing manner.

Daniels saw them, too. One man was carrying a double-barreled shotgun, the other had a six-shooter in each hand. As the two sleuths from Chicago were turned thus in their saddles the approaching men shouted an order to stop.

"Halt, there," came the shout. "Stop right where you are."

Wright, who was ahead, swung around, got a flash of the upraised weapons, drew his own revolver, and instead of shooting, spurred his horse forward in a mad dash for safety. There came a yell for him to halt and then a shot. Wright's hat flew from his head, but he kept spurring on.

Allen knew then that they were in for it. Just who the men were he could not be sure, but he believed they were facing the James boys, Jesse and Frank. Grimly determined to fight it out, he jerked out his revolver and fired at the nearest rider. The shot frightened his own horse and Allen next found himself fighting the plunging animal, helpless to defend himself, until with a shock he knew he had been hit in the left arm, crippling him. The horse bucked into the nearby brush, and that moment one of the attackers raced by, shooting.

"What became of Wright and Daniels?" Allen was asking himself as he struggled with his mount. He looked around, saw neither of them, and, before he could save himself, the horse had plunged beneath a tree, scraping Allen off against a low limb. There was a slug buried in Allen's side, and blood spouted from the wound. He could hear the sound of gun shots but see nothing as he staggered weakly to the roadside and fell helpless there. There was no more shooting.

Unable to cope with the scathing fire of the desperadoes, for it was later proved to be the James boys, Wright and Daniels had been forced to flee for their lives. Captain Allen was found by a passing citizen, removed to Roscoe, where he died six weeks later.

The news of this flaunting of the law reached Chicago and one of the Pinkerton's most trusted men at once volunteered to take up the job. This man, scarcely thirty, was a capable, courageous detective, John W. Wicher.

Disguished as a tramp, Wicher arrived in Clay County, Missouri, and headed for Kearney where the outlaws were known to be in touch with friends. Rumors had it that Jesse and Frank James were actually living there, hiding in the home of their mother.

ZERELDA COLE JAMES, mother of this pair of ruthless killers was the wife of a Doctor Reuben Samuels who had married the Kentucky widow in 1857. Kearney, Clay County, Mo., had been the Samuels home now for many years and it was to this place that the James boys returned often between their plundering raids and wanton murders.

To this house, known for years as the "Castle James," Detective Wicher made his wandering way, posing as a tramp.

The James boys, however, were suspicious of him at once, and Jesse, with his glassy black-eyed stare, pierced the disguise promptly.

"Stand still, mister," ordered Jesse, as he pushed Wicher back into the shadows of the trees. "We know who you are—know all about you. These ragged clothes an' all. Why didn't you wear 'em when you got off the train in Liberty?"

Wicher tried whining piteously. It was dangerous work, this sort, and he was in a tight spot. He was not wearing his six-shooter in sight. He tried to smooth them over. How should he know what they spoke of?

"You can't fool us," growled Jesse now. "Tell me what business you got with Sheriff Moss at Liberty. You been talkin' with him."

"You don't believe me?" cried Wicher desperately as he realized he was on the verge of the grave. "All right, then!"

He had perhaps a few seconds to live and he tried to yank his hide-out pistol free. But they were too quick for him. Like a pair of madmen they clamped onto him, tore his gun from his grasp, and Frank bound him snugly with ropes, hands and foot.

A horse was then brought and Wicher was placed astride it, led into the gloom of the wood, and bound fast to a tree where the hellion Jesse and his older brother Frank, tortured their victim for hours until he died.

As a gesture toward the Chicago Pinkertons, these bloody-handed scoundrels then cut him down and carried Wicher's body to a roadside so that a farmer driving next day to Independence would find him and report his murder.

Like a pair of wolf cubs, the two of them slunk back through the shadows to their

mother's home, where the woman, a strange figure of motherhood who championed the fiends she had borne so many years ago, shared their triumph over the law, and sanctioned their murders.

FOR more than a score of years Jesse James and his gang were the scourge of the western frontier. Some have said that the James boys had countless friends; that wherever they rode in flight there were friends to warn and guide them, to help them with reports, with fresh horses, food and clothing.

This has long been considered but the silly notion of distorted minds. True there were the aids, the supplies and the proffered mounts to carry them in safe flight from hard-riding posses. Was this friendship for the outlaw killers—brotherly love between hard-fisted frontiersmen—or was it the greed that offered with one hand and took in the other the recklessly flung wealth that the James boys could easily afford to scatter to the four winds, from their years of plundering?

Or, was it fear of death? More than likely these monsters, Greed and Fear, rode the border trails ahead of the murdering outlaw band.

How much further Jesse James would have gone is not the question now. His doom was long written across the Missouri sky. Every day and night that he rode with his plundering horde were hours of keen alertness. Reward hunters pounded in the hoofprints of his mount.

The chief executives of ten states were plotting for his capture, even for his death. It was Jesse James, dead or alive! And Governor Crittenden of Missouri (Jesse's long career of crime saw state executives come and go) called in Sheriff Timberlake of Clay County and H. H. Craig, Chief of the Kansas City Police.

A council of war was held. Jesse James had accomplished another of his many mysterious disappearances; had dropped from sight, though the depredations of the gang continued. Banks and trains still coughed up small fortunes to his guns and cunning; the stage coach lines reported the brothers sticking up their lines.

"There is a man," said Timberlake solemnly, "who can do this job, once and for all."

"What do you mean?" asked the governor.

"Well," declared Timberlake, "there have been rewards offered for Jesse James for many years. Dead or alive. No man will ever bring him in alive. That's what I mean. I'll get him dead."

"Get us the man who can do it," ordered Governor Crittenden. "This outlaw has made play with the law long enough. If we've got to fight fire with fire, I'm not standing in the way."

"Who is the man?" inquired Chief Craig.

"Robert Ford," declared Timberlake. "Some know him by the name of Johnson, but his right name is Ford, and—he is a cousin of Jesse James."

Thus was Robert Ford assigned the task of ending the outlaw career of one of the world's worst criminals. And Ford was one of but few men in the west who knew exactly where Jesse could be found.

JESSE JAMES had become used to being a wanted man. If he ever laughed, which was seldom indeed, it was at the law which snapped at his heels again and again, and missed. But Jesse had formed a new plan of eluding capture, and had moved to a quiet place just outside St. Joseph. Moved in the night, under cover of darkness, and with the new day he began life as Thomas Howard.

Here he lived now with his wife and family—the Howards, to all appearances. Except when Mr. Howard slipped away on a fast horse and became Jesse James, riding at the head of his outlaw gang.

Even while Robert Ford was journeying to the Howard home at St. Joseph, Jesse was planning to rob the Platte City Bank. So when Cousin Robert arrived Jesse made him comfortable, unsuspecting, and confidentially whispered of his plans, suggesting that Ford join up with the gang and get a share of the plunder.

This was in 1882, in the month of March. A few days later Robert's brother, Charley, appeared at the Howard home and both brothers let their host believe that they were enthusiastic about the forthcoming bank hold-up.

"It will be an easy one," assured Jesse with his usual bravado. "I'll go into Platte City and take a look at the place."

On the morning of April 3rd Charley Ford and Jesse went to the stable to care for their horses and prepare for the Platte city raid. Robert waited in the house, his mind on one thought alone. If he could ever get safely behind Jesse for an instant he could collect ten thousand dollars as easy as—well, there was a bit of a chance, but then, ten thousand was a lot of money.

Jesse James, alias Thomas Howard, was coming into the house with Charley.

"This is too hot," declared Jesse, removing his coat.

Bob Ford watched Jesse toss the coat on the bed, saw the feared outlaw glance down at his heavy belt with its two holstered guns.

"Somebody might notice these if I go out in the yard," mused Jesse. "Guess I'll take them off, too." With that he removed the belt and tossed it with the guns on the bed by the coat.

This was in all probability the first time that Jesse James had ever let himself get out of reach of his death-dealing sidearms. For a moment he stood, stretching, glancing out the window. As he swung around, and Robert Ford passed some casual remark about it really being a hot day, Jesse caught sight of a picture on the wall. There was a finger streak in the dust on the glass.

Picking up a rag, Jesse James stepped upon a chair and started to wipe the glass clean. Odd that he should have unconsciously chosen such a setting for his end, but his end it was, for behind him in that fleeting moment, Robert Ford saw his chance.

Sweeping up a pistol from the bed he took a single step. The muzzle of the gun was only a foot or two from the back of the outlaw's head. Came the swift click of a hammer and the thundering blast of a .45 caliber cartridge. One single shot for ten thousand dollars. Tottering there on the chair, Jesse balanced while the Ford brothers blinked, then his tall body collapsed and struck the floor with a thud.

In a flash, Jesse's wife was in the room, aghast, a cry of despair drowning the death gasp of the desperado.

WITHOUT a word the Ford brothers walked out of the house and marched to town where they telegraphed the governor and sheriff, then surrendered themselves at the police station.

For the killing of Jesse James the Ford brothers both were tried, found guilty as a matter of course and—many were shocked at the sentence—doomed to hang within a month. The story of the prompt intervention of Governor Crittenden, his unconditional pardon and Robert Ford's rampage with his sudden wealth is a fit sequel to the life of the man Ford shot and killed for his blood money.

The man who pulled the trigger that ended the career of Jesse James wound up as proprietor of a shady dive in the Colorado mining town of Creede. Here Robert Ford ran afoul of Deputy Sheriff Edward Kelly who punctured Ford's body with a shotgun at close range. Both barrels. Ford died on the spot.

What became of the other members of the James Gang? Who cares? Or perhaps there is a natural curiosity as to the fate of these killers who rode the lawless trail so many years.

Bill Chadwell and Clell Miller, as you recall, died with their boots on during the raid on the Northfield bank. Charley Pitts went down in death near Medalia, Colorado, when a posse's guns found his heart. Cole, Jim and Bob Younger went to Stillwater, Minn., prison, where Bob died of tuberculosis. In 1901 Cole and Jim were pardoned and a few months after this Jim lost his nerve and took his own life by gunshot.

Dick Little surrendered and took his chance on prison. What became of him is not known. Frank James, affected perhaps by the death of his brother and lacking the courage to go it alone, surrendered to Governor Crittenden in 1882, a few months after Jesse's death. He went to prison and was pardoned after which he returned home to Independence, Missouri, where he lived what is said to have been an exemplary life until he died.

So passed the James boys and their outlaw gang!

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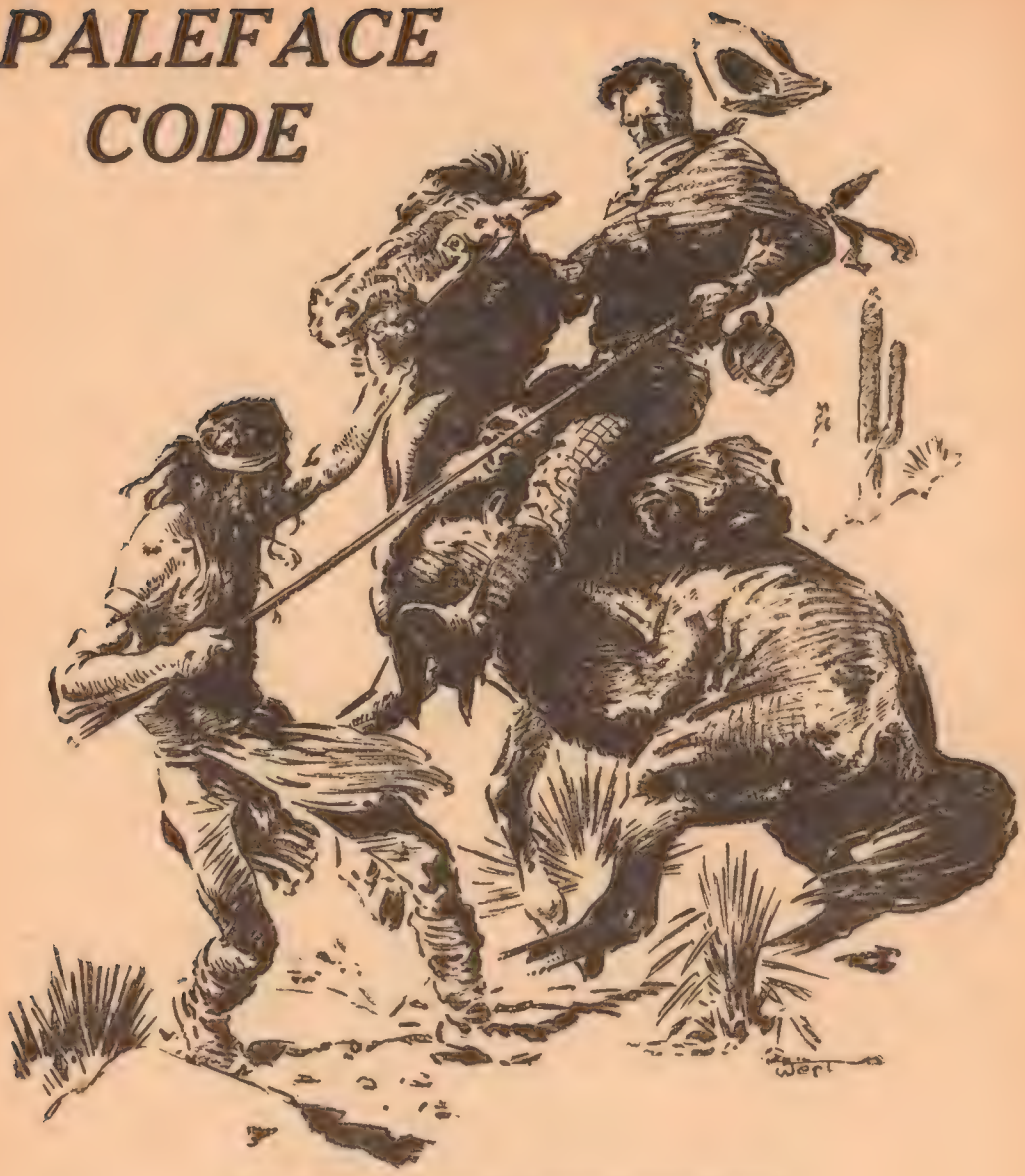

Dave grasped the spear to prevent another thrust.

By HAROLD R. STOAKES

Dave Jameyson was just another double-crossing white to these Indians . . . making friendship talk while secretly murdering them. . . . This time no words could save him—or could they?

THERE WAS NEVER an advantage to be gained by arguing with an angry Irishman, Dave Jameyson conceded, and right now Col. Timothy Whalen looked as though every one of the pounding red veins on his forehead was ready to burst open.

Through the half-opened headquarters window sharply-barked regimental commands echoed across the post compound, mingling with the creaking overtones of settler's wagons. Janos, the Apache war lord, had broken loose again and was painting a blood-red swathe across the Southwest.

While settlers scurried for the protection of the fort, Colonel Whalen was getting ready to march.

Dave could feel the Colonel's eyes upon him, like fire-brands burning into his skin. The Colonel's freckle-faced knuckles crashed on the spindly-legged table between them.

"By jumping Jehoshaphat," Colonel Whalen exploded, "you'll stay back with the rookies where you belong, or so help me I'll have you court-martialed and shot, even if you are a civilian."

The Colonel's heavy breathing emphasized the words. Dave glanced at Sill Hughes, whose long legs stretched complacently from a chair tilted against the wall.

"Is Hughes going out with the regulars?" he questioned. As correspondents for rival New York papers, he and Sill Hughes had a vital stake in any advantage that accrued to the other.

Dave saw the Colonel's gaze flick Hughes' legs.

"There's no reason for keepin' Hughes behind, just because you've developed a habit of disrupting the Army's best plans," Colonel Whalen said caustically.

Dave's eyes locked tentatively with the Colonel's red-rimmed orbs, but he held his silence. Colonel Whalen was touchy. Only two weeks before, more than half of the post's toughened regulars had been relieved and their places taken by green rookies, new to the Southwest. Now, with Janos on the warpath, there was a pitifully small force of seasoned Indian campaigners to engage them. Colonel Whalen planned to lead the regulars out, with the rookies bringing up the rear. The regulars would absorb the first impact of battle, and, unless vitally needed, the rooks wouldn't be called into action at all. A newspaper correspondent forced to stay back with them might as well be sitting on top of the moon.

THE BRIEFING OVER, Dave turned to leave. In a way, he had to admit, it was his own fault. But how was he to know that an Army scouting group was trying to contact Janos the same night that he had picked to try to get a message through to the Indian chieftain? His efforts had been credited with destroying the effectiveness of the patrol. Janos had suspected a trap, and Colonel Whalen's Irish temper had boiled over.

A buckboard wagon careened around the corner, leaving a cloud of dust around the door of Colonel Whalen's quarters as Dave stepped out, conscious of Sill Hughes' shuffling footsteps behind him.

The devil of it was, Colonel Whalen wasn't the only angry Irishman in the world. It wasn't difficult to picture back in New York another blood-red Irish face—the face of his boss. The publisher's last letter had been brief. All it had said was: *Stop sending dishwater dispatches. If Sill Hughes scoops you once more, you can go to California, you can go to Alaska, or you can go to hell, but not on this newspaper's expense account.*

Dave turned his face away from the dust that swirled up. A Scotsman caught between two Irishmen didn't have a chance.

Wagons continued to stream across the compound, seeking the safety of the fort. There was a sameness to them—the sameness of white-faced children, of softly sobbing women, of men whose pallor showed even through the leathery toughness of weather-hardened skin. Occasionally a limp body was taken from a wagon, tragic proof that Janos was neaby.

Dave moistened his lips, and looked at Sill Hughes.

"I'd give you a scoop," he said bitterly, "to know why Janos went on the warpath."

Sill Hughes' boney face relaxed in long lines.

"If you'd admit what my paper has known all the time, you'd know the reason," Hughes said condescendingly. "The Indian is a savage. He goes on the warpath because he wants to kill."

Another wagon turned into the gate of the fort. Even at the distance, Dave could see a woman huddled over a small child on the seat.

"But Janos was on the verge of signing a peace treaty and going onto the reservation," Dave argued.

"You mean he pretended he was," Hughes drawled. "The Indian is cunning enough to use treaty negotiations when he wants a breathing spell, but he's a savage at heart. War won't end in the Southwest until we've killed every man,

woman and child of the Apache tribe."

The impact of the words pounded at Dave's thoughts. It was this policy of ruthless annihilation that his paper was trying to fight, but it was a losing battle. Easterners were becoming enraged over reported Indian uprisings.

The wagon lumbered closer across the compound, so that he could see the dust-caked tear streaks that lined the woman's face.

"I still think the Indian is a human being, deserving of a human being's confidence and treatment," Dave said softly.

The wagon stopped opposite headquarters office, and it was only when the woman handed the child down that he could see the glazed lifeless eyes and the arrow shaft that protruded from the child's neck.

"Try telling that to the settlers," Hughes said bitingly. "They probably won't wait for the Colonel to court-martial you."

DAVE walked thoughtfully across the compound toward the commissary where he knew Rose Whalen would be found, threading his way through clumps of stone-faced settlers.

Sill Hughes' mass condemnation of the Apaches festered like a welted wound in his thoughts. He had first met Janos when the aged chieftain attended a peace conference in Washington. Later he had been assigned west by his newspaper to cover the progress of treaty negotiations. Through it all he had come to admire and respect the old chieftain who had tried with fairness to lead his people into the ways of civilization. Many of the younger braves, it was true, opposed peaceful settlement with the white man, and their depredations had punctuated negotiations. But this latest outbreak was no foray of hot-blooded braves. This was the full might of the Apaches, solidly united under Janos, riding in fury and hatred.

Dave's glance roved restlessly over the compound. The hot dryness of the air lay like huge hands against the stifled earth. There had to be an accountable reason for the right-about face that Janos had made. Either there was a reason, or Sill Hughes was right. The Apache was no more to be trusted than the rattler that coiled along the prairie trails.

He found Rose Whalen in the dust-filled center of the commissary, her forehead lined with dirt streaks, her face gravely calm. There was nothing of the Colonel's features about her, excepting her eyes which were blue and crystalline like her father's. They had always been wisely adult eyes.

Dave looked at her hand for reassurance that his ring was still there, but her hand was thrust into her apron pocket, hiding the fingers from view.

"I thought newspapermen were supposed to report the news, not create it," Rose said directly.

Dave looked into the unswerving blueness of her eyes. "Sometimes a man has to do some peculiar things to get the news," he said gently.

He saw the sudden doubt prismed in her eyes.

"Sill Hughes doesn't seem to have any trouble getting the news," she said pointedly. "They say his dispatches scoop yours."

Dave shifted uncomfortably, feeling the prickling indignation that pushed against his tongue. It was admittedly easy to send the kind of dispatches that Hughes sent out. It was easy to report the news, if you knew in advance exactly what you were going to say. There was no necessity to check facts, if you always assumed, as Sill Hughes did, that the Apaches were wrong, that the white settlers were right.

Yet, he knew, these were things that a man couldn't say. And, it was true, that while he had felt the responsibility to check facts, Hughes had rushed into print ahead of him.

Nor could Colonel Whalen and his daughter be blamed for misunderstanding his motives. The Colonel could hardly be blamed for coming to distrust a newspaper that failed to find the facts to back up the course it advocated. The Colonel was ready to agree with Sill Hughes that the only good Apache was a dead one.

"I think in time you'll know who your friends are," Dave said quietly.

The ring that Rose Whalen dropped against his palm was like a hot coal burning against his flesh.

"I think we already know," she said shortly, turning away.

The regulars rode out shortly before

noon. An hour later, when he moved out with the rookies, Dave could see the foam of dust on the far horizon that marked the path that Colonel Whalen was taking toward the hills.

It would not, he felt sure, go unnoticed by the Apaches. If Janos followed the usual tactics, the Apaches would drift steadily back in the face of the troops until they reached a point for ambush, or the protection of the southern mountains where they could make a stand. Colonel Whalen's depleted force of seasoned campaigners would be hard-pressed to cope with them.

THE HOOFS of the cavalry mounts rang hard against the crusted ground of the prairie. The sun hovered inches overhead, making a haze of the wasteland. The sweat of the rookies stained darker the leather of their saddles, and streamed into their eyes, blurring vision.

Remembrance of Rose's sudden decision lay like a numbing slab of ice across Dave's thoughts. All his life he had roamed the world, reporting the events that other people lived. Life with Rose Whalen had promised a new richness—the richness of living as other men lived.

Nor was the loss of Colonel Whalen's friendship to be lightly taken. When he had first arrived in the Southwest, the Colonel had taken him in tow, and taught him the ways of the country. When he was anxious to learn telegraphy, Colonel Whalen had spent painstaking hours of instruction, while their friendship ripened.

"Shore, and I kin tell ye a story about an Irishman," he had tapped out as his first message.

"Faith and begorra, and what pinch-penny Scot's got a right to be talkin' about the Irish?" the Colonel had tapped back.

They had needled one another with stories, without malice, until finally he had found that Rose shared her father's liking for his dour Scotch ways.

He thought of Rose again, and wondered how her eyes would have looked if she had been the woman who handed the dead child down from the wagon.

He looked away across the wasteland toward the dust of the regulars that hung like a storm cloud against the earth. Maybe Sill Hughes was right about the Apaches. Sometimes it was easy to let a belief become a prejudice. Thoughts could become playthings that men dawdled over. A limp child, with the warmth of life creeping out of it, spoke a sharply-steeled argument that was hard to refute.

Dave felt the eyes of the rookie shavetail on him, and turned his head away. The young lieutenant had, he knew, been given strict instructions not to let him out of sight. Yet, he had to escape sooner or later. In Washington, an Indian policy was still in the making. People were entitled to the facts. If Janos had wantonly broken his word, the Apaches would have to suffer for it.

When nightfall came, a cold camp was made on the moonless flats, while nervous rookies patroled the outer boundaries of the camp. From nearby the nickerings of the hobbled cavalry mounts seemed doubly loud above the mirthless talking of the troops.

Dave grunted as he crept inside his tent and wrapped himself in his blanket, feeling the coldness of the ground seeping upwards. He waited until silence had fallen over the camp, broken only by the soft tramping of the sentries who walked guard duty. In the distance a prairie dog howled quiveringly and Dave felt shuddering coldness. It could be a prairie dog, or it could be a stalking Apache signaling to his tribe.

Noiselessly Dave crept to the rear end of the tent, raised the flaps and peered out. The darkness had settled solidly over the wasteland, as though the sky itself was crushing down against the earth. Buckling on his revolver and knife, he slipped out on his belly and crawled cautiously toward the horses.

Suddenly the night was alive with small sounds. Across the camp a sentry stumbled and cursed tensely. A horse's hoofs pawed the earth so that the sound of it echoed along the hard-baked ground. Heavy snoring from a nearby tent sounded like a trumpet's blast.

Dave had crawled half the distance when his boots scuffled loose pebbles. A sentry turned back toward the tents. Dave rolled quickly away, breathing silently, feeling pointed tent pegs crushed against his back.

"Who's there?" The rookie's voice

quavered in the darkness as he scuffed about the tents. Dave remained rigidly still. Finally the soldier grunted and turned back to his post.

Dave resumed the painful crawl toward the horses, and a few minutes later pulled himself erect. Sensing the nervousness of the camp, the mounts were restless and strained against the hobbles.

A shout broke from the camp, followed by the hard sound of running boot heels. Quickly Dave slashed one of the mount's hobbles, and leaped on its back. The snarling whine of cavalry rifle bullets slashed around his head as he drove south into the darkness. Finally the frenzied noises of the camp dwindled behind him, and there was only the rhythmic beat of the horse's hoofs to break the night. He pulled his mount down to a trot.

AS HIS EYES became more accustomed to the darkness, Dave could make out the shape of the mountains that bulged into the sky to the south. It was, he judged, at least four hours before dawn would break, and in that time he could be ahead of Colonel Whalen's troops and into the protection of the hill country.

He smiled wryly. Protection was a poor word for a man to be thinking when he was headed into an Apache maw. He had come to regard Janos almost as a friend, but maybe Sill Hughes was right. Maybe all Janos had wanted was a little temporary friendship.

Dawn came finally, a sickly pinkish gray pinched against the horizon as he reached the hills. The wind blew with moist coldness about his forehead, holding a promise of rain. As light crept across the flats, Dave peered back to the north until at last two dust clouds could be seen. One of them would be Colonel Whalen's regulars. The other, the rookies from whom he had escaped.

Keeping to the scant protection offered by the boulders, he moved westward, parallel to the base of the mountains. Later would be time enough to circle about and try to reach Janos in the heights. It would be foolish to ride straight up, ahead of the troops for whom the Apaches would be waiting.

He continued on, feeling the sultry heat increase as the pink grayness of the sun moved higher in the heavens. Dust balls swirled across the flats below.

He had ridden for nearly an hour when he cut an Apache trail leading westward. It was not, he recognized, a trail left by Apache warriors. More than likely it was made by the oldsters and women and children who sought cover while the braves waited to fight.

As he followed the trail, it branched repeatedly, giving indication that small groups had left the main body to seek their own protection. Dave followed the main trail in puzzled silence. Usually the old men kept the band together, knowing that the troops would not attack women and children.

Finally the trail indicated that only a handful of the original group still moved westward. Then, from the protected slope of the hills, he saw the stragglers below —scarcely a dozen of them fleeing with more speed than was their custom.

The Apaches were afoot, except for an old chieftain who rode a string-legged horse. A light drizzle began to fall, turning the thick dust of the flats into greasy clay.

Dave rode parallel to the Apaches. Ahead of him in the rocks, a rifle cracked and the Indian warrior pitched forward from the horse. Then a half dozen white men charged out from the rocky slope.

The massacre was short lived. The rain became a fine sheet that obscured the figures below. Finally, through the watery film, Dave saw the white attackers ride off toward the west.

When he reached the flats a grisly scene awaited him. With the exception of two small childrn, all of the Apaches had been scalped. None had escaped the wanton fury of the ambush.

Huddled with the rain at his back, Dave felt a savage hatred wrench his thoughts. The rain coursed over his forehead and trickled into his eyes. Perhaps here was the key to the riddle that he sought to unravel—the cause for Janos's sudden decision to go on the warpath. At any rate, Colonel Whalen should have a report on it.

Dave rode thoughtfully back to the protection of the rocky slope. A report without proof might not carry much weight. If he could deliver the scalpers to the Colonel, it would be more impressive. He

fingered the scarred handle of the Army revolver at his side. One man didn't stand much of a chance of bringing in a half-dozen armed killers.

His fingers closed in sudden determination on the reins of his mount. The scalpers had not seemed in a hurry. If he could get ahead of them, he might turn them back.

Pushing forward, Dave continued westward for a half hour until he felt sure that he had outdistanced the riders on the muddy plain below. Then he rode down and turned back eastward, and lashed his mount into a fast gallop.

The Apache scalpers appeared suddenly, like ghosts in the rain.

"Apaches," Dave shouted, reining up. "They're coming out of the west."

HE SAW the quick suspicious exchange of glances among the surly-faced riders. Fresh scalps hung from blood-stained belts, rain beads glistening on their straight, black hair.

"We just run into a bunch of Apaches east a ways," a spokesman muttered. "Janos has took to the hills."

Dave shook his head emphatically. "You're riding west at your own risk," he said forcefully. "Maybe Janos circled around." He started away. "I'm riding to save my own skin."

The doubt trickled away from the leader's face.

"Maybe we better come," he mumbled.

As they rode, Dave glanced again at the Apache scalps.

"Where did you take the scalps?" he questioned.

The leader's glance shifted away. "We run onto a pack of braves back aways and fought 'em off."

The blandness of the lie lay like a weight against Dave's thoughts. He pointed toward a particularly long-haired scalp.

"That looks more like an old woman's scalp than an Apache warrior's," he said.

The spokesman eyed the scalp. "It'll look like a young feller's when I get through doin' some barberin' on it."

The spokesman smiled a snaggle-toothed smile.

"Ain't you heard? A couple of big ranchers down near the border are offerin' a bounty on Apache scalps." He paused, eyeing his companions. "Course they said fightin' Apache scalps, but it takes a right smart rancher to tell a man scalp from a woman, after the hair's been yanked."

A feeling of cold dryness washed over Dave, despite the steady rain that matted his clothes.

"What's the purpose of the bounty?" he asked, his voice sounding odd even in his own ears.

"Takes simple thinkin' to answer," the spokesman said. "The ranchers heard tell that the Apaches was 'bout to sign a treaty and go on reservation. So they figured mebbe a little trouble might change things."

The man sucked at the words with relish. "Long as the Apaches is fightin' you got a chance to kill 'em down to the last red devil they is. Then you don't have to live with 'em no more."

Dave's thoughts lumped coldly, tightening his forehead. So that was the reason Janos had gone on the warpath—in retaliation for the attacks on his tribe. Attacks that the ranchers had been careful not to report to Colonel Whalen.

Dave looked down at the soft mud of the flats, smooth now, like the surface of still water. Because the ranchers had not wanted peace they had caused an uprising of the Indians—and the settlers who wanted only to live and let live had been made to suffer for it.

It was treachery against the Indians, but it was more than that. It was treachery against one's own people—against children who had no way of defending themselves against the whistling flight of venom-tipped arrows. It was a story the entire nation should take into account when an Indian policy was formed. A story that Sill Hughes would have a hard time refuting. A story that would justify the long search for the truth, if he could get through with it.

Dave glanced apprehensively toward the rain-curtained shape of the hills. There was an even chance that they might run into Janos' warriors before he could reach Colonel Whalen's troops.

The rain formed driblets on Dave's lips, and he turned his face away from the wind. He'd spent hours studying Morse code under the Colonel's watchful eye, and now the first time he could use it, the nearest telegraph set was miles away.

"Looks like the rain's letting up," he observed dourly.

When they reached the flats where the massacre had taken place, Dave glanced about in consternation. The bodies of the Apache women and children were gone. He felt the eyes of the leader of the group probe him suspiciously.

"Thought you said the Apaches was coming from the west?" the man grunted, alarmed.

Dave shifted his glance toward the hills. "Maybe they're all around us."

He looked back just in time to see the leader's eyes glaze, his lips sucked inward in sudden breath. Then the man slumped forward, an obsidian-pointed arrow driven half way through him.

A bullet cut Dave's hat, the report of the gun following after it, sounding soggy on the rain-swept air. Dave dug his boots into the horse's flanks, but the next instant a wraith-like shape leaped for his mount's bridle.

THE HORSE spun about, its hoofs slipping against the greasy clay underfoot. Fighting to hold his seat, Dave had only a moment to pull back from the jagged-pointed Apache spear that slithered along his side. Grasping the spear handle to prevent another thrust, he fumbled for his gun with his free hand.

A guttural bark sounded above the noise around him, and he felt the spear go limp against his hand as the Apache brave stopped straining against it. He looked up quickly. Janos sat his horse quietly a few feet away.

Dave glanced around. The Apache revenge against the scalpers had been complete. He looked back at Janos.

"White man say he Apache's friend," Janos spat.

Dave looked down at the inert bodies of the range marauders. The scalps that hung from their belts were crushed under them in the mud.

"I met these fellows back a ways," Dave protested. "I was taking them to Colonel Whalen."

The Apache chieftain glowered. "White man with long pen twist words for paper. Maybe twist words for ear, too."

The silent hostility of the Apache braves pressed against Dave's nerves. Being caught with the bounty scalpers was damning evidence, but it was a chance he had had to take.

"White man die," Janos said tonelessly. "But not quick like others."

Dave kept his gaze level with the chieftain's until the Apache leader turned away. A quick, merciful end was the warrior's right. For such as he, suspected of treachery behind the guise of friendship, there would be torture, until every throbbing muscle of his body cried out for death.

The rain slackened as the Apache chiefs talked, and gradually smoky-colored sunlight warmed the flats. From the brief knowledge of the language that he had gained, Dave caught the drift of their plans.

Feeling that they were outnumbered, the Apaches had circled over the hills, intending to make a getaway instead of standing to fight the troops. Now, enraged by the massacre of their people, the younger braves demanded vengeance.

The plan was simple. While Colonel Whalen's men combed the hills, the Apaches would cut back to the fort, hoping to catch the handful of men who protected the women and children off guard.

The coldness in Dave's mind seemed to freeze his ability to think. He felt the glances of the Apaches upon him, and heard the guttural words of Janos.

"The Devil's Well."

The Devil's Well! Dave felt the feeling drain from his tightly bound arms.

Spanish Conquistadors had first brought infamy to the well-like slit in the mountains that had earned it the name. The Spaniards had used it like a Roman arena, lowering a stubborn Indian whose secrets they sought into the unscalable pit. A gleaming-toothed wildcat, a razor-horned bull, or a basket of rattlers was usually enough to make even an Indian scream for the mercy of a lowered rope.

Bronzed hands jerked at him as his arms were lashed to his sides. When the Apaches had finished, they left two long lead ropes trailing from his waist.

Naked-thighed braves seized these as they leaped onto their ponies. Dave felt the hard jerking, first one way and then another as they led him away, accompanied by a handful of other braves. Over his

shoulder he saw the masked smiles of the Apaches as they swung away toward the fort.

The sun forced its way through the clouds and warmed the soggy smoothness of the ground. Ahead, the clay of the flats stretched toward the mountains. Dave felt a hard jerk on one of the ropes. The Devil's Well! He couldn't expect more mercy from the Apaches than they felt had been dealt to them.

The opposite rope jerked him about, catching him off balance, so that he stumbled. Straining to keep from falling, he forced his heels against the slick mud and let himself be dragged, digging a deep trough across the muddy plain.

The Indians slackened the rope so that he was forced to run a few steps to regain his balance, still falling backwards, so that only the heels of his cavalry boots punched through the crust of mud.

Jerked, alternately sliding and running, until his boot heels threatened to break, Dave floundered across the flats. When they reached the mountains, he glanced back. The long path that he had left stretched toward the horizon, the floundering steps drying into crusted shapes in the sun.

THE WIND blew cold in the hills as they climbed upwards. When they reached the Devil's Well, Dave sensed the savage pleasure that coursed through the Apaches as he gazed into the cavernous slit. He steeled himself against the quivering nervousness that fought for control of his muscles.

The Apaches seemed in no hurry. Undoubtedly they would wait until the others returned from the fort before exacting their revenge. He huddled against a stone.

In front of him the sun inched its way coldly down the sides of the Devil's Well, stretching toward the century-old powdered bone dust at the bottom of the pit. Involuntarily, Dave pictured the ringed torches, the straining, revenge-set faces.

The coldness and pain from lack of circulation in his tightly bound arms racked through him, until finally he dozed. He awakened at the sound of scraping footsteps above him.

Blue-uniformed troopers swarmed over the rocks. Dave rolled quickly just as an Apache spear shattered itself against the rock where he had been.

The Apaches vanished among the rocks. Dave felt relief cascade sharply through him, leaving almost a pain against his thoughts as he looked up at the rookie lieutenant from whom he had escaped during the night.

The lieutenant grinned. "We got your message and came as fast as we could." It was close, at that.

Dave stood up while they untied his arms. Color crept slowly along the cramped flesh. The sudden release seemed unreal. He hadn't dared hope that the message would be read aright.

When they reached the flat below, Dave looked back at the floundering path that he had left — the now crusted troughs skimmed out of the mud—dashes of a sort mingled with the punched dots of his boot heels.

The lieutenant whistled. "The Colonel said it was the damnedest Morse code he'd ever seen."

IT WAS LATE when they reached the fort, but Colonel Whalen still awaited them. He listened gravely while Dave told of the bounty set on Apache scalps.

"I'll send the report to Washington," he said tersely. "We'll see if we can start treaty negotiations with Janos over again. The scalping will be stopped."

"I'm ready for that court-martial," Dave said.

He saw the suddenly veiled eyelids that dropped over the Colonel's eyes.

"Who ever heard of court-martialing a damn fool Scotchman," the Colonel sputtered.

Dave stood up, watching the slow curve of the Colonel's lips.

"Shore, and I could be tellin' ye a story about the Irish," he said softly.

The Colonel rattled papers on his desk. "Faith and ye can save it for Rose," he blustered. "She's over at the commissary eatin' her heart out. Why's beyond a sane man's knowin'."

Dave smiled as he paused at the door. "It might be a good time to ask her," he said softly, gazing across the darkened compound.

This corner of FRONTIER has been reserved up to now for the yarns swapped by the great old-timers—true tales they have lived themselves, or at least have seen happen. This time we hope you'll forgive us for departing from that custom, to print the interesting communication that follows. You will recognize the writer as one of our regular contributors.

We're sure you'll agree it contains a yarn worth spinning. FRONTIER STORIES is dedicated to a period of American history when a man didn't mince words, and to a region where mincing words didn't pay.

DEAR EDITOR:

It is high time the name of William S. ("Old Bill") Williams—hunter, trapper, mountain man, and guide—be cleared of the undeserved stigma John Charles ("Pathfinder") Fremont deliberately cast upon it in 1849. Unfortunately, Williams died without even knowing of this stark injustice and for ninety-seven years nobody has come to his defense. The result is that historians and biographers, following Fremont's lead, invariably write Williams down as incompetent, if not worse.

It all grew out of Fremont's fourth exploring expedition in the winter of 1848-49, in which eleven men and one hundred and twenty mules lost their lives in the rugged mountains of the San Juan range of Southwestern Colorado. In all the history of American exploration there is nothing which surpasses this for gross mismanagement by the leader and stark suffering for the whole party.

This expedition, sponsored and financed by a group of St. Louis citizens, among whom was Fremont's father-in-law, Senator Thomas Hart Benton, had for its object the discovery of a route for a railroad to the Pacific Ocean through the Rocky Mountains between the 37th and 38th parallels. Skeptics, and there were plenty of them, said that, even if rails could be laid across the ridges, trains could not operate over them in winter because of snow. Fremont's purpose was to disprove both of these objections by practical demonstration and observation.

Fremont expected Kit Carson, guide and mainstay for his three previous expeditions, to join him somewhere west of the Missouri River, but Kit did not come. Ninety years later his youngest son told me that his famous father refused to join the party because he knew they could not cross the mountains at that time of year along the route Fremont proposed to follow.

The expedition arrived at Big Timbers on the Arkansas River in November, 1848. Here they found Thomas Fitzpatrick, a member of former expeditions, but now Indian Agent, in council with the Comanche, Kiowa, Arapaho, and Cheyenne Indians.

Fitzpatrick and the weather-wise Indians not only gave them no encouragement but warned them that the snow was deeper in the mountains than was usual for that time of the year. Upon arriving at Bent's Fort a few days later the same information and warnings were repeated. "Still," wrote Fremont to Senator Benton on November 17th, "I am in nowise discouraged by the prospect, and believe we shall succeed in forcing our way across."

A little less than a week later they arrived at "Mormontown" or "Pueblo," as the little new settlement at the mouth of Fountain River was called. Here he found Bill Williams and a few other mountain men in winter quarters. Being without a guide, he undertook to hire one of them, but none would at first consent to go. At length Williams and Richens Lacy ("Uncle Dick") Wooten, against their better judgment, agreed to accept the responsibility. Can "Old Bill" Williams be blamed for this?

The route Fremont intended to follow, as stated in his letter to Senator Benton, was up the Rio Grande to its headwaters, across the Continental Divide, down the Colorado, and across the Wasatch Mountains to Monterey, California. The impossibility of this is seen in the fact that even today neither railroads nor highways penetrate much of the region he proposed to cross in midwinter. In fact, he who would follow the trail of this expedition from Pueblo, Colorado, into the mountains in summer must resort to saddle and pack horses, as I did.

Three other important members of the party were the Kern brothers of Pennsylvania, Dr. Benjamin, Edward M., known as "Ned," and Richard H., called "Dick." The first was employed as medico and the others as artists. Each kept a diary (against Fremont's orders) which, taken together, present a very complete picture of what happened in the mountains.

Leaving Pueblo on November 25th, they headed southwest toward a pass in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, known today as Mosca. The men walked and the one hundred and twenty mules in their pack train carried a bushel of shelled corn each in addition to their other loads. Ahead of them, they were sure, lay toil and hardship.

THEIR DIFFICULTIES began at once. Sometimes they had to toil through three feet of snow while icy winds swept down upon them from the lofty mountains. Wooten saw the situation, gave up the job, and returned to Pueblo.

Striking the Huerfano River, they followed it upward to the Pass, which they crossed on December 3rd in a violent snowstorm which blanketed the mountains to a depth of five inches. That night they made camp in a little hollow between the Sand Hills at the mouth of the Pass and the mountain.

Next day they went on a couple of miles but a high wind drove them back to the camp of the night before. On December 5th, Alex Godey, who for some reason seemed to have supplanted Bill Williams as guide, led the party along the base of the mountain back of the Sand Hills through snow six feet deep.

The thermometer now stood at zero, two of the men were badly frostbitten, and icicles more than an inch long hung from their mustaches and beards. Dick Kern humorously remarked in his diary that they looked like "Old Time or Winter." On December 8th they made camp on the Rio Grande in the San Luis Valley in two and a half feet of snow. Next morning it was so cold the air was filled with spicules of ice which lent a peculiar, whitish aspect to the scene.

On the night of December 11th, while in camp on the Rio Grande, Fremont had a conference with Bill Williams as to the route they should follow. They had come to a place where further progress up that stream was impossible because of deep canyons and lofty mountains.

Williams advised that they turn back, skirt the rugged San Juan Mountains through northern New Mexico, and then swing back to the route they wished to follow. Fremont, despite the fact that Williams was upon familiar ground and he a stranger to it, vetoed the idea. He had set out to force his way across the Rocky Mountains along a definite line of travel and nothing should turn him back.

This was a fatal decision. That night Williams wrote in his notebook, "I wanted to go one way and Fremont will go another, and right here is where our troubles commence." Prophetic words, these.

Disregard for Williams, who seemed to have already been demoted to the position of muleteer, was characteristic of Fremont on this journey. The same thing had happened to the three Kern brothers. When they were well on the way, too far to turn back, they suddenly found themselves reduced to the same lowly position. This was intolerable to young men of their capacities and station, yet their remarks upon it and their leader in their diaries, though frank, are remarkably fair and judicial. Ned accuses him of breaking faith with them, of being responsive to flattery, ready to believe lies carried to him by the "meanest in the camp," and lack of respect for them. Fremont loved to be told about his greatness, he said, and was jealous of anyone who was better informed upon any subject than he.

When they left camp on the morning of December 12th they turned abruptly to the north, probably along Alder Creek near present Del Norte, Colorado, and entered the frightfully rugged La Garita Mountains. Immediately they became involved in a series of almost impassable canyons; the hills they had to cross were high and slippery, and the snow sometimes came up to a man's elbows when seated upon a mule. Always there was intense cold and snow. The first night they made camp in six feet of it and spread their blankets upon the bark of trees to keep them dry.

For five awful days they fought their way onward, making an average of only six or seven miles per day. They traveled along mountainsides so steep they could scarcely maintain their footing, and when they camped at night they could hardly lie in their beds. Occasionally a mule would stumble and roll head over heels to the bottom. Sometimes they could rescue them, but more often they abandoned them to their fate.

Snow fell almost every day and the higher they climbed the colder it grew. Frequently they encountered snow fifteen feet deep and one day Dr. Benjamin Kern's stocking froze to both his foot and his boot so that it had to be thawed out by the fire before he could remove it. The corn carried by the mules gave out and the weakened animals were abandoned one by one.

On the 13th they awoke with two inches of snow upon their blankets. When they started it took them an hour and a half to cover five hundred yards up the steep, slippery hillside. Next day eight mules gave out and were abandoned to their fate. Now men had to be sent ahead to break trail for the failing animals. That night they camped in a little canyon about fifty feet wide. The corn the mules had carried across the mountains had all been used and there was little grass for them to eat. While they slept it snowed three inches more.

On the morning of the 15th they had to climb a steep hill which exhausted both men and animals. Dr. Ben Kern tied Alex Godey's mule to his and got him up the slope, but the effort was in vain. They left him by the trail, where he died of starvation and cold. An hour before sundown they made camp on the mountainside, about a quarter of a mile from the top of what they took to be the Continental Divide, having covered only three and a half miles during the day. That night seven mules froze to death.

NEXT DAY men went ahead to break trail over the lofty ridge ahead of them. About ten o'clock in the morning the remainder of the party set out along the trail with the animals. Mules fell to rise no more, packs were abandoned, and packsaddles, whose pads had been devoured by the starving creatures the night before were thrown away.

To add to the hardships, a *poudrerie,* a violent wind laden with pellets of frozen snow, swooped down upon them. No living creature could face that icy blast and live. Dr. Ben Kern said it was a day that tried the stoutest hearts and his brother Dick remarked that if they had stayed on that bare, wind-swept summit half an hour longer the whole party would have been lost. Fremont said that ten or twelve men were "variously frozen, face, hands, or feet." Dr. Ben Kern's eyelids stuck together from the cold and for a time he could see nothing but red.

The stupor of death began to steal over them all, and Bill Williams was dragged from his mule unconscious. Seeing the hopelessness of going ahead they turned back to the camp of the night before and

erected shelters of blankets to shield themselves from the icy blasts.

BY EVERY TOKEN Fremont should have turned back now, but he was grimly bent upon going on at any cost. Most of the mules were still alive, the men were strong, and they had plenty of food. Had they gone back to the San Luis Valley and followed the route Bill Williams suggested, all of the men and some of the animals would have been saved. As though driven by an inexorable fate, Fremont gave the order to try it again the next morning.

Leaving their camp ringed with the bodies of dead mules, they set out with men leading the way to pound a trail through the snow with mauls. The *poudrerie,* which had not abated, again beat upon them with icy, merciless fury. Again the men froze, mules died, and packs were abandoned, never to be retrieved. Fremont said that the trail "showed as if a defeated party had passed by." They reached the top and descended the other side through from three to fifteen feet of snow. At the bottom, near the head of Wannamaker Creek, they made camp in a small grove of pine trees in four and a half feet of snow. The last ounce of strength men and mules possessed was expended in crossing that lofty ridge.

Now the die was cast and the doom of one-third the men and all the mules sealed. The different "messes" into which the party had been divided dug holes in the snow from four to six feet deep and made small fires at the bottom. The one to which the Kerns belonged attempted to erect tents but without success. The snow melted and dripped upon them as they sat about their fire and their backs were covered with ice. Before going to bed at night they had to scrape away six inches of snow from their blankets with tin dinner plates.

One by one they became smoke-blind and snow-blind and were unable to move about. They cut down trees six feet from the ground, at the top of the snow, and did their pitiable best to keep warm. On top of the ridge where the wind had swept away the snow a little grass was found. Such mules as were able to make it were sent there in the hope that they might find food enough to survive. Those which were too weak to go stood pathetically about the campfires or struggled aimlessly off through the snow to die. By December 20th only fifty-nine remained and the end for these mules was rapidly approaching.

When the party left the Missouri River it possessed as fine an outfit as was ever seen upon the plains. By the time it reached its farthest advance camp in the little grove of pine trees, which Dr. Ben Kern called "Camp Dismal," provisions, thought to be sufficient to carry them through to California, were running low. On December 18th they ate frozen mule meat for the first time.

Of their situation Fremont said, "We were camped somewhere about 12,000 feet above the sea. Westward, the country was buried in deep snow. It was impossible to advance and to turn back was equally impracticable. We were overtaken by sudden and inevitable ruin."

This latter remark was an afterthought, for on December 18th he sent a party out to break trail to the west and find a better camp site. That morning Dr. Ben Kern awoke to find eight inches of snow upon his blanket and told his brother Dick that the expedition was destroyed. They would be doing well, he said, if they reached some settlement with their lives. The party sent out to the west was driven back by the violent wind and they settled themselves down in their holes in the snow to stay alive if they could.

"The courage of the men failed fast," wrote Fremont to his wife. "In fact, I have never seen men so soon discouraged by misfortune as we were on this occasion." The only saving item in that statement is the use of the little pronoun "we." One might respect him for including himself among the discouraged ones had he stopped there. "As you know," he continued, "the party was not constituted like the former ones."

This tragic expedition, whose main facts have been hidden too long, reveals the man Fremont really was. Never, before or afterward, was he put to the test as he was here. It is curious indeed that this, his one collossal failure, has been overlooked by historians, biographers, and admirers of the great "Pathfinder." The solemn truth is that by the time his party

reached the little grove of pine trees he was so overwhelmed by the disaster that he was no longer capable of leadership. For three awful days and nights Fremont sat in his hole in the snow doing nothing to remedy the situation.

It was hoped that the mules on the unprotected ridge would somehow find enough grass to keep them alive. In this they were disappointed. The starving creatures huddled together, gnawed at each other's manes, tails, and backs, and died one by one. Those which remained at camp ate the pads off the pack-saddles and anything else they could find. One of them chewed the sleeve of Dr. Ben Kern's overcoat and another devoured his brother Dick's woolen scarf.

On the 21st another party was sent out to the west to find a new camp, but it, too, was driven back by the storm. The men were painfully frozen.

After five days of confusion, indecision, and inactivity, Fremont ordered that the baggage be carried back to the Rio Grande by portages. A few mules seemed to have been still alive but they were not used, possibly because they were too weak. Carrying loads of sixty to seventy pounds each, the men transported the baggage, first to the top of the ridge, then to their old camp on the other side, which Dr. Ben Kern called "Camp Hope." Upon arriving there they found it covered by six feet of snow which they dug away with pot lids and tin dinner plates. By December 25th this task was completed.

Fremont said that on that day he read Blackstone to pass away the heavy time and to forget what was going on about him!

ON DECEMBER 26th volunteers were called for to go to Taos for relief, one hundred and sixty miles away. From those who stepped forward Henry King, Thomas E. Creutzfeldt, and Bill Williams were chosen. With King in charge they struck out for the Rio Grande carrying a blanket each, a pound of sugar, fifty bullets, a few pounds of frozen mule meat, and macaroni. By the time they reached the river their food was all gone.

No game was to be found, their feet were badly frozen, and they had to remove their boots and wrap their feet in strips of blankets. For eight days they lived upon those boots, belts, and knife-scabbards. Not much of a record of their awful journey exists but enough has been told to indicate that their sufferings were indescribable.

While they were still forty or fifty miles short of their goal, King died, on January 12th, 1849. The others ate his body. Creutzfeldt gave out and Williams sat down beside him to await the end.

Breckenridge went on alone. After going a short distance he sighted five deer and succeeded in bringing down one of them. Cutting out the liver he ate it raw, trapper style. Then he sliced off some of the meat and carried it back to his famishing companions who ate it with the blood dripping from it. When they had regained a little strength they dragged the carcass to a small grove of trees and proceeded to feast.

Back in the mountains the remainder of the party toiled day by day moving the baggage down to the Rio Grande, making only three or four miles a day. Fortunately, the weather changed for the better and occasionally the chirp of a bird was heard. But another foe as implacable and deadly as frost now assailed them.

By January 1st their provisions, which consisted mostly of mule meat, were about gone. On that day it began to snow again. Once it took them a whole day to cross a steep hill with their loads. While camped in a small canyon that night, Alex Godey went ahead to explore the trail. When he returned he reported that they would have to go back and find another way.

In view of the fact that Fremont is held up to American school children as one of the greatest and most courageous of explorers one regrets to record the fact that he was the first one to reach the Rio Grande. This he did on January 2nd, eleven days before the last straggler got in, in company with Alex Godey, Charles Preuss, Theodore McNabb (Godey's nephew) and Jackson Sanders, his colored servant. Godey went back at least once to assist and guide his suffering companions, but there is no record of Fremont having done so. Although his party was apparently stronger and better fed than those following him he appeared content

to let them shift for themselves.

The hardships endured by the men on the way down to the Rio Grande defy description. They straggled along singly and in small groups or messes over a distance of some seven or eight miles. The Kern brothers stuck together and brought up the rear.

On the night of January 2nd, a heavy wet snow began to fall. When they awoke the next morning they were buried under six inches of it. Next day the Kerns spent the forenoon sorting out their books and other property and burned what they felt they could not carry. That afternoon Ned gave out and Dr. Ben had to quit while yet a quarter of a mile from the next camp. Raphael Proue joined him after dark, dispirited and melancholy. They went on and arrived at camp at half-past eight.

For some reason Dr. Ben Kern discontinued his diary on January 6th but his brother Dick kept on with his entries, though they were sometimes brief. On January 9th Raphael Proue, his legs frozen almost to his waist, fell by the trail and died.

On January 13th the Kerns and the last of the stragglers arrived at Fremont's camp on the bank of the Rio Grande.

Here again one regrets to record solemn truth. When the half-dead, hungry men finally crawled into Fremont's camp he was not there to greet them. Two days before he, in company with Alex Godey, Charles Pruess, Theodore McNabb, and Saunders Jackson, had set out on foot for Taos. His explanation of this desertion of his men to his wife was that after waiting sixteen days for word from King's party he decided to go to the Red River settlement twenty-five miles north of Taos, Arroyo Hondo, for help. Jessie Benton Fremont, of course, approved this inconsiderate, calloused action but no other unbiassed person can.

Fremont's place was with his men. The plain, simple responsibilities of leadership demanded it of him. Instead of being the first to reach the comparative safety and comfort of the Rio Grande he should have been the last. It was indeed necessary to receive aid from the Mexican settlements, but the leader was not the one to go in search of it. Alex Godey, who was by far a better man any day than Fremont, was the man for the job.

Another damaging fact which cannot be overlooked is that he waited nine days after reaching the Rio Grande before doing anything about aid from Taos. Meanwhile his men lay in camp living on provisions which might well have sustained them on the trail. Had he either gone or sent a party to Taos immediately after arriving on the river the lives of ten of his men would possibly have been saved.

TAKING provisions for two or three days, what baggage they could carry, their arms, and leaving inexperienced Vincent Haler in charge of the remaining thirty men, Fremont set out down the Rio Grande. On the fifth day they encountered a young Ute Indian, the son of a friendly chief whom Fremont had previously known. Nearby was a village of several lodges and a number of horses. In return for a rifle, two blankets, and promises of other valued articles, the young Indian agreed to take four horses and guide them to Arroyo Hondo. They spent the night at the Ute village, got plenty to eat, and started on again the next morning.

Since Fremont makes no mention of any attempt to send relief to his starving men upstream it must be assumed that he made none. He said he left them with provisions for two or three meals, more or less, and about five pounds of sugar to each man. One bony nag would have saved the lives of ten men.

Before they had gone far the next morning they came upon Williams, Creutzfeldt, and Breckinridge feasting upon their deer.

Fremont said he took the three men with him to Taos. Years later Breckinridge said he stopped only long enough to roast a little of their venison, then went on, leaving them to shift for themselves. One makes his choice between these conflicting statements.

Fremont arrived in Taos on January 20th and became an honored guest in Kit Carson's home. Two days later Alex Godey was rushing back along the trail with thirty horses, four Mexicans, and an ample supply of provisions.

The thirty men left on the Rio Grande huddled about their campfires for four

days and until their food was all gone. On January 16th they moved about two miles downriver to a new camp. That night Manuel, one of three Consumne Indians Fremont was taking back to California, begged Vincent Haler to shoot him. When this was refused he went back to the old camp and died there.

When they went on the next morning Henry Wise refused to accompany them, remained beside the little fire, and also died. On the morning of January 18th Carver remained in camp and was seen no more. On the following day somebody killed a deer, all of which, except the shoulder blades, was appropriated by Vincent Haler and the stronger members of the party.

On January 21st Haler led them upon such a long march, fifteen or sixteen miles, that the weaker ones were completely used up. That day he declared the party broken up, that it was now every man for himself, advised them to form small groups, took the strongest men, and pushed ahead. When he got to Taos he told Fremont he did this to prevent the starving men from eating each other. That day Vincent Sorel, Joseph Moran, E. T. Andrews, and Henry Roher fell by the wayside and died. The next to go within a day or so were George Hibbard and Benjamin Beadle.

Those left behind when the stronger members of the party went on believed they were doomed and made camp for the last time on January 22nd. Vincent Haler told Fremont they did this in order that the living might live upon the bodies of the dead until relief arrived. One day Charles Taplin shot a grouse and someone else found a dead wolf. These, said Ned Kern, saved their lives. He got a thigh of the bird as his share and boiled it for breakfast and supper eight times. In desperation they searched for mussels, snails, and earthworms along the river bank, but found none.

They became so weak they could no longer chop wood for their fire. Then they crawled from one fallen tree to another, making fires of the branches. Although they suffered no pain some were going snow blind, and all, convinced they were to die, became listless and careless as to when the end would come.

Alex Godey arrived on January 28th after having narrowly missed finding them. They crowded about him, eagerly devouring the bread he gave them. When they were strong enough they mounted the horses he brought and slowly made their way toward Taos. By February 12th the twenty-four survivors of the ill-fated expedition were all at Taos, where they found Fremont busy making preparations for going on to California.

AS SOON AS he was able Bill Williams got up a party of Mexicans and, accompanied by Dr. Ben Kern, returned to the scene of the disaster to salvage as much of the property as they could. They never returned. Afterward some of their effects were found among Indians and others with Mexicans. Just what happened has never been brought to light. With these the number of losses in the party rose to thirteen.

But the supreme tragedy of this last phase of the general disaster is that Williams died before he could even know that the blame for the whole affair was being laid on his shoulders. Had he lived, he would soon have heard of the letter Fremont wrote to his wife, claiming that Williams had somehow misled the expedition. Mrs. Fremont made this letter public.

The question "Who was to blame for it all?" is easily answered. It was Fremont himself, and nobody else. First of all, it was his expedition, and he was the leader. Regardless of everything else, the responsibility of that office falls upon him. Had it been successful he could and would have justly claimed the credit; since it failed he cannot with honor shift the blame to the shoulders of another. The route, as indicated in his letter to Senator Benton from Bent's Fort, was chosen before Williams was employed.

The evidence that Williams knew the country well and objected to turning north into the La Garita Mountains is too positive to be ignored. Nobody except Fremont ever accused him of being ignorant and incompetent. He was neither, and contemporaries who had known him for years gladly testified to that fact.

Sincerely yours,

MARK HOWE.

Moonlight glittered on bright steel. Beauchamp was pinned against the door.

GAMBLERS' GULCH

By R. S. LERCH

It was no place for a clean, hard mountain man. It was a place where deviltry reigned and corruption ran wild. What could a woman say that would bring Dirk Kendall into such a hell-hole?

AN APACHE YOUTH called Black Eagle found Dirk Kendall's camp in the high San Juans and delivered the faintly scented note. Kendall read it and said, "Thirteen days." The lad spun his tough mountain pony and started back, riding furiously.

Kendall made it in twelve days, with

a mule carrying food and equipment and three pack mules loaded with the peltry of beaver and otter. *La Ciudad de Santa Fe!* Passing between the high wall of the Presidio and the whitewashed adobe huts of the poorer Mexicans, he entered the treeless Plaza, with the portico of the Palacio on his left.

His quick, frontiersman's eyes examined the colorful scene; Mexican dandies, traders, buffalo hunters, scouts, Kanakas, Indians, Negroes, and a coach from San

Miguel discharging passengers at La Fonda Inn. He missed the soldiers before the barracks and the sounds of drilling on the *plaza de armes*. Then he recalled the rumors of the arrival of Colonel Kearny's Army some eighteen months before, and of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo the previous February. He was,

and had been for over a year and a half, on American soil without realizing it.

He noted, too, an unusual number of hard-looking plainsmen and studied with interest the short guns they wore in leather sheaths. He'd examined one of these new weapons shown him by another frontiersman and intended to have one before he went back to the wilderness.

There seemed an air of hostility in the town at variance with the carefree atmosphere he had previously known. Many of the gun-packing men moved with a swagger that was little short of insolence and the resentment of the native whites was unmistakable. He remembered the Texas expedition of '41 and the attempt to gain jurisdiction over New Mexico. These men from the plains, then, were Texans.

Across the square Alexander Breton stood before the entrance to his store. A small man, gray-haired, with sharp eyes and a sensitive mouth, he stepped forward with a quick smile as Kendall approached.

"Dirk," he cried. "It's good to see you after two years. Looks like this is the largest catch you've ever made. You're in a little early, too."

Kendall nodded and leaned from his riding mule to take the thin hand of the trader. "I'll leave the plews and be back later. Have to clean up and make a call. I want about five hundred in gold. Can you arrange it?"

Breton smiled again. "I think I can. You've got twenty times that amount to your credit here, not counting the peltry you've just bought. Ride around to the back and I'll have a man take care of your train."

Kendall dismounted in the walled yard behind the post. Breton was waiting in the trade room, a small bag of gold coins in his hand.

Kendall said, "Thanks, Alec," and motioned toward a big iron safe, with its bright green and gold paint. "My money in that?"

Breton nodded. "Most of it, but it won't be there long. These are troublous days. Texas has laid claim to the jurisdiction of what they call the County of Santa Fe extending far to the north, and the rough element is pouring in. Indian raids have increased along the trail. The government now has a fort on the Arkansas east of Cimarron Crossing. But we've a big, safe train heading east, so I'm taking the bulk of the gold with me."

A BIG young man in a flowered vest, gray frock coat and trousers entered the post. When he saw the long-haired, buckskin-clad, dusty frontiersman an expression approaching disgust flitted across his features. Alexander Breton's eyes betrayed a faint uneasiness as he watched the man approach.

"My nephew, Ashville Clayborn," he said.

With supercilious unconcern, Clayborn nodded and said, "Howd' you do," without offering his hand.

Dirk Kendall gave no reply other than to gaze steadily into the man's eyes. There was something in that steady, penetrating regard of the frontiersman that made Clayborn blush and hurriedly turn to examine a display of cotton goods.

Breton accompanied Kendall to the door, speaking softly. "I want to have a talk with you before our caravan starts back, Dirk. My old manager is losing too much of the fur trade to Bent and St. Vrain and I brought young Clayborn here to work up to the job, but I'm becoming convinced he's not the right man. Furthermore, the nightlife seems to fascinate him too much. I'll state my offer to you later. It may be difficult for you to leave your carefree life, but—"

Kendall interrupted, grinning briefly. "Carefree? Eating nothing but *penole* and jerked meat and *atole,* and living with eyes in the back and ears all around, and hair that never is quite sure it's going to stay on my head? Carefree? Maybe some think so. I'll see you before I return."

At the home of Mexican friends Dirk Kendall bathed, shaved, and trimmed his shoulder-length hair. From his possible bag he selected a clean buckskin outfit, whitened with pipe clay. The hides composing it had been chewed by the squaws who had tanned them until shirt and leggins were soft and flexible as the finest linen. Beaded moccasins, a fancy, beaded sheath holding his best blade, and a beaded belt at the waist completed the outfit. He looked down at the remainder of his equipment. Recalling the urgency of the scented note that had inspired his forced trip, he selected a knife with no guard and con-

tained in a stiff, greased sheath, and fastened it out of sight beneath his fringed shirt.

Crossing the plaza, he headed down a narrow street toward the outskirts of town and a grove of spruce a half mile away. There was a broad clearing in the center of the grove. Saddled horses were tethered at the tie rails near the edge and in its center sprawled the white, adobe casino, *La Cabeza de Cibola*, with its replica of a bison head, lighted by flanking kerosene flares. The sounds of a string orchestra came from the windows at the right, while across their yellow glow moved the shadows of dancing couples.

Kendall passed through the entrance to a small foyer with stairs leading to a second story, and turned to the left. He entered a broad, long room, with a stage at one end, balcony booths on the left and a long bar at the right. Small tables were scattered over the room, but few of them were occupied. It was too early for the stage show to start. At the bar he ordered *aguardiente*.

With his back to the high mahogany, Kendall surveyed the opening beneath the balcony. There was action in the room beyond it, whence came the sound of the ivory pill racing around the spinning roulette wheel, the rattle of dice in the birdcage, and the murmur of dealers at faro, monte, and stud.

Dirk's gaze shifted to a man watching with an unwinking stare. He was standing with his back to the wall at the side of the entrance to the gaming room. His square, heavy build was that of a bouncer, and his square, heavy face, with eyes like flat, colorless slate in their cold challenge, was that of a bouncer who enjoyed his work. His frock coat and black, broadcloth trousers only accentuated the suggestion of ruthless force in the man. Kendall noted the bulge in the right skirt of the coat, and the blue tinge to the heavy jaws, then deliberately turned his back and downed his drink.

From the gaming room came the musical voice of a woman, low, with a faint huskiness, yet with a carrying quality that brought the words plainly into the theater. "Place your bets, gentlemen." Then, a moment later, "All down," followed by the spinning of the roulette wheel and the clicking of the little ivory pill. Kendall crossed the room. The man at the door watched his approach.

Only when he was ten feet away did the frontiersman's gaze shift to the guard. Dirk's eyes were slightly narrowed, and by contrast to the flat ones of the guard they exhibited little dancing lights far back in them, as though he were laughing inwardly. The laughter came to the surface for a second and then Dirk passed the man and looked down. The guard's big hands were clenched at his side until the knuckles showed white. The smile in the frontiersman's eyes crept to his lips and was almost immediately wiped out.

IN THE CENTER of the wall to his right was a twin of the man in the doorway. Kendall almost turned around to be sure there were two of them, and then he noticed this guard's eyes didn't quite track. His left eye seemed to be watching the door while his right surveyed the room directly ahead.

The spinning of the wheel stopped and the musical voice of the croupier called, "Single O, gentlemen."

Kendall swung to face the center of the far wall where the big roulette wheel was flanked by tables of chuckaluck and faro and he got another shock. A second frock-coated, slate-eyed copy of the man in the theater was standing in a far corner covering that section of the room. This man's slight difference from the others lay in the fact that there was no bulge at the thigh and that the thumb and forefinger of his right hand constantly caressed a heavy gold watch charm suspended from the chain at his waist.

"Gun behind his belt," was Kendall's mental deduction.

Then, facing the roulette wheel as he moved lithely between the tables of poker players, he forgot the look-outs.

Glory Carver was tall for a woman, yet so perfectly proportioned and so fully matured that it was unnoticeable. At thirty she had the skin of a girl of sixteen, smooth, pale, yet glowing with the flush of youth as well as of artifice. Her pale gold hair, smooth and lustrous as satin, was piled high on a queenly head and the evening gown of dark blue velvet, decol-

leté to reveal her beautiful shoulders and full curves, completed a picture that would have reduced most men sick with the loneliness of the mountains to gibbering idiocy.

Dirk Kendall drew a gold coin from a pocket of his buckskin shirt and placed it on the lay-out.

"Double-eagle on the red," he murmured, then looked up.

She was looking straight across the board at him and there was no recognition in her deep blue eyes. Her muscular control was likewise perfect; no facial muscle moved, but the tell-tale little heart in her throat hammered out the swift beat of the tumult within her. Then, in the split second before she shifted her gaze, her message came to the surface of her eyes. She looked away, called, "All down, gentlemen," and spun the wheel.

Immediately she signaled to one of her housemen to take her place at the lay-out, then turned and left the room.

The pill settled on Double O and the croupier raked in Kendall's coin together with the other counters on the board. Those around Kendall began placing their bets. Dirk turned away and looked over the room, then sauntered out. He paused at the door.

The theater was beginning to fill now and waiters were serving drinks at the tables. In the foyer, at the foot of the red-carpeted stairway to the second story, Glory Carver was talking to a young man with flushed cheeks. He appeared to be expostulating vigorously. When he paused the woman's reply was audible to the keen-eared frontiersman.

"I'm not free this evening, Ashville. I've already told you that. I do not wish to be disturbed. Perhaps later I'll be down. Run along now and dance, like a good boy. I see Lottie waiting for you in the dance hall," and without giving young Clayborn a chance to object further, she turned and ascended the stairs.

He called something up to her, but she neither looked back nor replied. The petulant anger of a spoiled child darkened young Clayborn's face as he turned toward the dance floor. Dirk Kendall crossed the room, noting that the guard had moved over toward the entrance where his gaze could cover the entire theater without the necessity of turning his head.

He heard the footsteps behind him, even though the foyer and the stairs were covered with heavy-piled carpet. Thick fingers with the strength of a gorilla in them gripped his left arm. The fingers bit into the flesh and Dirk raised his forearm slightly, tightening his muscles. The fingers separated slowly under the expansion of the trapper's swelling biceps. A heavy voice, greasy with coarse sarcasm, spoke in his ear, "Where you goin', Dan'l Boone?"

Dirk turned slightly, facing the guard, then looked down at the hand, hairy to the second finger-joints. Perhaps the man was too thick-witted to understand that look; perhaps he understood it and accepted the challenge. His fingers did not relax their pressure.

"Take it off," Kendall said quietly.

"No one goes up them stairs, Buckskin."

"Take it off," Kendall said even more quietly.

"Miss Carver said she wasn't to be disturbed. Now turn around and—"

"No, *you* turn around." Dirk Kendall's right hand shot to the man's wrist, while his left raised and gripped the elbow.

THE GUARD sucked in his breath and drew back a fist, when something happened that stopped the blow. The lean, brown fingers dug into wrist and elbow. The guard's hairy fingers straightened automatically and he was spun toward the door. His hand was up between his shoulder blades and his body was bent forward. Dirk Kendall took three long strides and the man ahead of him took a dozen, short, running steps.

Despite his bulk, the look-out's body cleared the three steps of the stoop and lit in the dust of the yard in front of the casino. So swiftly and noiselessly had it all happened that no one in the theater realized anything was wrong.

When the guard scrambled to his feet, cursing, and reaching for the Colt beneath his dusty frock coat, the doorway was empty. He rushed inside and stood looking around. Nowhere was the tall, buckskin-clad frontiersman visible. He started for the stairs, hesitated, then walked quickly to the gaming room. At the door he jerked his head at the other two look-

outs. They left their posts, moving quietly toward him. The three walked across the room with the theater guard in the center talking low and swiftly.

Up on the second floor Dirk Kendall tapped lightly on a closed door. From behind it came a low, controlled voice.

"Who is it?"

"Dirk Kendall, Glory."

"Come in, Dirk—quickly."

The voice now held a vibrant quality expressive of relief—and of fear.

II

SHE WAS STANDING beside a window, with the long, rose-colored drapes parted slightly, looking down into the yard in front of the casino.

She said softly, without turning around, "Thank God you've arrived, my friend. I dared not recognize you downstairs. I'm being watched, I think. But come here. I want you to see the second most dangerous man between the Brazos and the Colorado."

As he reached the window at her side an uneasiness which the solitary trapper could not understand stirred him strongly. It had something to do with the nearness of this beautiful woman and the faint fragrance of her, reminding him of the scent that had touched his nostrils when he had opened the note in the fastnesses of the San Juans. She lifted a hand slightly, indicating the clearing, and Dirk Kendall shifted his attention to a phaeton and a pair of grays attended by a negro. He craned to see.

Two men had just left the low-slung carriage and were walking toward the entrance. One was Alexander Breton. The other towered above the small trader. With a harshly chiselled face, with a strong nose and jaw, and a tuft of black hair in the hollow between the square chin and the sensual lower lip, he epitomized ruthless force and unscrupulousness. He was dressed in black broadcloth and his trousers were tucked into big boots that shone darkly. His frock coat was unbuttoned and the skirts stirred with each step, revealing the grips of a brace of revolvers. The pair disappeared from sight, entering the casino.

Kendall stepped back. "All right, Glory," he said quietly. "I've seen him. Now I want to see the other man."

She turned and her dark, arched eyebrows were raised in interrogation. "The other man?" she asked.

Kendall nodded. "You said he was the second most dangerous. I want to meet the first."

A tiny smile trembled on her lips. She gestured toward the door through which Dirk had entered.

"There he is—I hope—*I know.*"

Dirk whirled, conscious that the nearness of her had deadened those highly tuned senses that seldom failed in their warning of approaching danger. It was a long second before he recognized the tall man in white buckskins as himself reflected in a floor-length mirror on the inside of the door. He turned away slowly, again facing Glory Carver.

"Thanks, Glory," he said. "But you're wrong. There's a little scout, half my size, and the mildest, softest speaking man in the world. His name is Kit Carson. But who's the one I saw just now?"

"I still think I'm right," the woman said. Then, with a slight gesture expressive of both fear and revulsion, "He's Gaul Beauchamp, and he was my husband's partner before I was married."

A faint shadow darkened Dirk Kendall's eyes and pictures flashed before his mind: Glory, a spindly-legged, tow-headed kid and he, a gangling youth, back in the Kentucky hills. Her maidenhood and the promise of the dazzling beauty that would soon be hers. His own maturing, the widening of his shoulders, the filling out of his muscles, and the almost unlimited endurance developed in traveling the wild mountains back of their two small farms. And then the coming of the smooth gambler, Silver Carver, and Glory's marriage. Kendall's own migration westward and the infrequent news about Glory and the two years of hell Carver led her through before his death. And, six years later, the crossing of their trails once more, when he had come to Santa Fe for the first time to trade for his peltry. Under her management, Carver's casino had changed, had developed a reputation for the squareness of its dealers—and its owner. Kendall brought his mind to the immediate present.

"This Gaul Beauchamp is the reason

you sent for me?" he asked her gravely.

She seated herself on the sofa facing the door and motioned Dirk to one of the deep chairs near her, nodding an affirmative to his question as she did so.

"He arrived in Santa Fe with Alexander Breton's wagon train and immediately came to see me. He stated that Silver Carver had been his partner, that Silver had robbed him of ten thousand dollars and ran out on him, that the stolen money was what built this place, and that he had hunted the entire west for Silver.

"The fact that Silver had come east first, to Kentucky where he met me, he said, had thrown him off the trail. At length, in St. Louis, he heard from one of the scouts about this place, of the death of Silver, and the fact that I was now running it. In payment for that debt, he said, he would take over but would let me keep what I had already made out of the *Cabeza de Cibola.*"

Glory Carver, in stating these facts, had spoken with clipped sharpness and her voice and eyes had grown hard. She paused, drawing a long breath. Dirk Kendall waited, knowing more was coming.

"I know Beauchamp lied," she continued. "Not that his story couldn't be true. Both of them were crooks, but I know where the money came from that built this place. Silver won it in a single sitting —twenty-four hours of poker with four rich traders in Westport. The next day we joined a wagon train heading over the Santa Fe trail.

"I laughed at Beauchamp, at first, then I ordered him out of the place. Before he left he said he would give me thirty days to get my affairs in shape, then he and his men would take over. I immediately hired the three brothers for lookouts, Jud, Jed, and Jared Sifter, and sent the Apache lad, Black Eagle, to you with the note."

DIRK KENDALL shook his head with dissatisfaction with her story. She waited for him to speak. He remained silent for a long moment.

Finally he said, "There's something the matter with that play. If he intended to do what he says, he wouldn't have warned you. He would have moved in suddenly. That thirty-day wait isn't like his kind."

Glory Carver looked down at her hands, folded in her lap, and spoke without raising her eyes.

"That isn't all. He—he wanted me, along with the place. He proposed a partnership—finally even marriage. It was then I ordered him out, and it was then he gave me thirty days to change my mind. Besides, his men weren't with him. During the past week they've been drifting in, hard men from Texas with the look of outlaws. Beauchamp has been here often since then, and tried to claim much of my time, but he's said nothing further about his proposition."

Kendall failed to completely smother his curse. Glory looked up and spoke through straightened lips. "I would sell this place in a minute—I hate the life—but I will not be driven out."

Dirk nodded his understanding of that. "Those three look-outs you mentioned; can you trust them fully?" he asked.

"I can count all the men I'd trust fully on the thumbs of one hand, but they've been loyal so far as I know. Certainly I've had less trouble than before they came."

"Strange they didn't follow me up here," he mused, then told her of his experience.

She smiled slightly. "That would be Jud you handled. You probably convinced him you were expected. But it might be wise to watch your back trail—he won't forget. That's certain."

Kendall swung suddenly to face the door. He had caught the sound of soft steps on the carpet of the hall. Someone knocked on the door and behind him he heard Glory draw in a sharp breath.

"That will be Beauchamp, probably," she murmured. Then, louder, "Yes?"

"May I come in, Miss Carver? It's Gaul Beauchamp." The voice was silky, with a poisonous inflection.

The frontiersman arose, facing the door. "I want to meet him, Glory. Tell him to come in," he said very softly.

"The door's unlocked." There was a sharpness in her voice that carried little welcome.

Kendall's gaze centered on the face of the gambler who stepped quietly into the room. If there was any surprise at seeing him with Glory, it was not evident in the man's dark eyes. In fact, Kendall

might not have been there at all; Beauchamp did not once glance toward him. He bowed to the woman on the couch as he backed the door shut and leaned against it.

With his eyes on Glory Carver, he again spoke silkily. "I hesitate to intrude, Miss Carver, but developments within the last few hours seem to have made it necessary. Since our business will be of a private nature, I'm sure you will excuse your visitor until a little later."

Glory Carver's reply was as cold as a desert night.

"My visitor is here at my request," she said pointedly. "Furthermore, anything you have to say to me I would prefer to have said before him—said at once—and very briefly."

It was then Gaul Beauchamp looked directly at Dirk Kendall for the first time.

Kendall learned nothing from that glance. The gambler's eyes were dead pools of fathomless black. But when he spoke the sneer in his voice was but thinly veiled, and his question was more of a demand than an interrogation. "You're the trapper Kendall. I've heard of you. Can you keep your mouth shut?"

Dirk let silence answer the question, and his own cold eyes did not shift from the obsidian ones of the gambler. The silence dragged. The opacity lifted from Beauchamp's eyes and revealed a restlessness like a writhing vapor beneath the surface, venomous in its warning and revelation of sudden hatred.

"I asked a question," he stated without raising his voice.

"I answered it," Dirk returned just as quietly.

"Will you kindly state your business?" This, sharply, from the woman on the couch.

Beauchamp turned. When he spoke this time his voice had been ground to an edge. "You will remember a proposition I made you a little over three weeks ago. Circumstances have arisen which now make it necessary that you give me an immediate answer."

HE HELD UP his hand to check the answer Glory's sharply indrawn breath indicated she was about to give. "I'd remind you, Miss Carver, before you make a mistake, that you will be infinitely better off, more secure, and I assure you as much happier as it is possible for me to make you, if you will accept my offer."

There was a moment of silence and during it Dirk Kendall seemed to stiffen slightly, as if his attention were centered on something outside of the room. Beauchamp had edged to one side until he had cleared the door and was leaning against the wall. His movement brought him closer to Dirk Kendall, whom he again conspicuously ignored.

Once more, as Glory was about to answer, Gaul Beauchamp spoke calmly and with the faintest suggestion of pleading underlying the warning of his words. "Careful, Miss Carver. I would recall to you that it is marriage I offered, an honorable marriage."

This time Glory Carver got her words out, and each one stung like a scorpion's stab. "I'd rather be the slave of a Zuni buck for life than be your wife for an hour. As for you taking over this place—"

"All right, boys," Beauchamp broke in with a snap, turning from the needle points of fury in her eyes and glancing toward the door.

That shift of his eyes was an error Beauchamp could not afford. He neither saw nor heard the two long strides that placed Dirk Kendall at his side as the door swung suddenly back and a pair of gun-hung men entered the parlor.

From the theater below a strong-voiced soprano was singing a Mexican love song.

"Goss, cover this trapper and the woman. We'll take them along. Salter, notify the Sifter boys that we've taken over and everything is under control."

Beauchamp snapped his orders and started to turn back to face Glory Carver when something pricked him. He looked down. A knife with an eight-inch blade, razor sharp and with a needle point, had pierced his clothing and was nicking the skin just over his kidneys. His orders were immediately canceled by the edged voice of Dirk Kendall.

"Hold it, you two. Beauchamp, if you don't want your insides trailing along the floor, tell your two renegades to get their hands in the air."

Gaul Beauchamp raised his glance. His dead black eyes were still those of a gam-

bler, revealing nothing, but behind them he was swiftly calculating chances with this buckskin-clad man whose eyes seemed to see everything and who stood lightly balanced with his left hand holding the knife steady against the skin and his right raised slightly, its fingers gently toying with the fringe of buckskin running along the shoulder of his shirt.

At the sound of his sharp words the two who had entered the room swung around. One of them was directly between Dirk and Glory, who had arisen. The other was beyond Beauchamp, and both were two paces inside the door. Glory moved quickly, placing herself to one side and out of line of possible action. The two newcomers were bent forward slightly, hands hovering over the grips of their weapons. They looked at their boss and Beauchamp's eyes flashed a quick warning just a split second before he acted.

The gambler's elbow shot back, knocking the knife point away from his side, though slicing a six-inch cut in his coat. Beauchamp's mistake was in standing with his back against the wall. When he reached for his gun his elbow struck the wall. The other two were slashing down for their weapons.

Kendall's hand at the fringe of his shirt darted out of sight behind his ear. Goss's gun was already clearing leather. Light from the chandelier glinted briefly on a streak of silver, and Goss staggered back, dropping his gun and plucking futilely at the haft of a guardless knife protruding from his throat.

A lean, brown hand with fingers like steel hooks caught Beauchamp by the neck and hurled him sideways even as the thrown knife was in the air. He was smashed into Salter and the two staggered back. They had scarcely separated and straightened when they discovered Dirk Kendall in front of them with Goss's gun in his hand. Goss was down, his head lying in a great pool of blood that was already ceasing to spread.

Gaul Beauchamp raised his hands slowly. That gun muzzle was too steady and the way the frontiersman's thumb curled over the hammer while he held the trigger back tight against the guard was a further warning. Salter, beside Beauchamp, took a quick look into the trapper's eyes, and his hands were likewise raised to shoulder height.

"Glory, get their guns," Kendall ordered a little sharply.

Her cheeks colored now only by artifice, her lips a tight, grim line, Glory Carver moved quickly behind the two men, lifted their weapons and carried them to a chair at one side.

"You—" Dirk began, thrusting the gun behind his beaded belt.

"No, you!" Beauchamp cut in, his lips stretching in a thin smile. "Look behind you."

Kendall did not move until Glory's short little cry made him spin around, at the same time leaping to one side so that he could watch his prisoners as well as the door.

Jud Sifter, his black coat still carrying the dust of the yard into which he had been thrown, stood in the opening, and his hairy hand gripped a six-gun whose muzzle swung to center Dirk Kendall.

III

THE TABLEAU held for a moment. Gaul Beauchamp and his gunman, Salter, were leaning forward, ready to jump either for their guns or for the frontiersman. Jud Sifter, his flat, slate-colored eyes now alight with lust for revenge, stood solidly rooted on feet spread apart, his gun level and cocked, his finger tensing on the trigger. He was going to shoot, even if the trapper raised his hands in surrender.

The singer in the theater had finished and a storm of applause punctuated by yells and whistles, broke out.

Over at one side of the parlor, beside the chair into which she had dropped the guns, Glory Carver stood white-faced. Scenes of violence were not strange to her and, the first surprise over, she became watchful, wary, thinking swiftly.

Dirk Kendall was balanced lightly on the balls of his feet. His left hand was at his side, and the knife it held was out of any possible position for throwing. The dead man's gun was thrust behind his belt, and might as well have been across the room with the other guns. Yet there was nothing suggesting consternation about him. There seemed to be, rather, an increased tension, and his sharp, calculating

gaze was fastened on the gun whose muzzle centered him at the waist, and on the finger curled around the trigger, slowly increasing its pressure.

The woman's gaze shifted for a second to Dirk Kendall's tensed figure and suddenly she knew what he was about to attempt. She knew, too, that without her help failure would be nearly certain. Even with her help, Dirk's safety would depend on perfect timing as well as on his incredible speed. She reached down quickly and secured one of the guns, cocking it with both thumbs, and leveling it at Gaul Beauchamp.

"Don't move, Gaul. Or you, Salter," she snapped.

Her words and action broke the deadlock. Kendall saw the last fraction of pressure put on the trigger and he flashed aside as the gun spurted fire, its report deadened by the applause from the theater. The lead tore through Kendall's buckskin shirt, burning the skin along his side. Jud Sifter instantly cocked the gun and swung the muzzle for a second shot. That shot was never fired. With a sweeping, underhand throw, Dirk had released his skinning knife. Jud Sifter cursed with a fading breath while his dying fingers tried to jerk out the blade buried in his heart, as his knees slowly bent and his eyes went blank.

Kendall whirled, his right hand now gun-filled. He backed toward the chair beside which Glory Carver was standing. Hurried footsteps sounded on the stairs.

Without taking his gaze from the two men, he said, "Glory, see if that's your other two bouncers coming, or more of Beauchamp's renegades. If it is, ask them in; if it isn't, shut and lock the door. You two sit down; you're going to stay for a while," and he motioned toward the sofa with the gun muzzle.

Beauchamp and Salter sat.

At the door, Glory said to someone hurrying along the corridor. "It's all over, boys. Put your guns away and come on in," and she stood aside while Jed and Jared Sifter stepped into the room.

The wall-eyed Jed caught a glimpse of his twin's body and cursed while his right hand dived for his gun.

"Hold it," Kendall snapped.

The pair swung around and found themselves facing a brace of guns in the hands of Dirk Kendall.

"Lift 'em," Kendall snapped.

Their hands went up reluctantly. Glory Carver shut the door and turned the key in the lock, then moved over behind them and took their weapons.

She said, low, and with passionate contempt in her voice, "I'd like to empty each of these into a traitor's belly," then crossed toward the chair with two more guns in her hands, taking care to circle so she would not come between Kendall and the others.

Kendall motioned with his gun. "Get over with your own kind."

One of them started to say something, but at a warning look from Gaul Beauchamp he remined silent. If either Kendall or Glory Carver needed any further evidence of the guards' complicity in the attempt to take over the casino they had it in that silent exchange.

There was that about the two Sifter brothers and the renegade Texan that indicated each was waiting a chance to get at the tall frontiersman, and Dirk spoke without removing his gaze from them.

"Glory, will you go down and see if Mr. Breton is in the theater yet? If he is, ask him to send his negro for my riding mule and my four pack mules. Tell him to have provisions put up for five men for a week, and to have the animals brought around to the rear of the casino without crossing the open space in front, and to say nothing about it to anyone. Tell him also to have the negro stop at Juan Mendoza's house for my dark buckskins and my rifle."

She looked startled at his request, started to ask a question, then restrained herself and hurried toward the door. Dirk's next words halted her. "If you've anyone you can trust—that faro dealer for instance, and the Apache, Black Eagle, send them up with some rope."

WITHIN a few minutes the faro dealer and Black Eagle entered the room. There was no emotion revealed in the pale face of the houseman, but after one look at the two bodies and the four prisoners the Apache youth looked at Dirk Kendall and his dark eyes began to shine. When the four were bound and gagged

Dirk motioned the Indian to a far corner of the room. His voice was but a low murmur.

"There are more of these men in town, but I don't think they'll try anything now. They'll be without a leader. However, it is best to be prepared. Do you know the trail of your people from here to the Valley of Stone Gods?"

Black Eagle nodded a vigorous affirmative.

"If our White Lady needs me again," Dirk continued, "I will be somewhere along that trail."

Again the Indian youth nodded. "I find you," he said with conviction.

An hour later four bound and gagged men, a tall frontiersman in smoke-browned buckskin, and a pale-faced woman in an evening gown, moved along the corridor and down the stairs at the rear of the second story. Five mules, one of them saddled, were tethered to trees at the edge of the small yard. The faro dealer came out and helped Dirk Kendall mount the prisoners and tie their ankles beneath the bellies of the mules, and fasten a long rope to the cantle of the saddled mule and thence to the bridles of each of the others. When all was ready and the faro dealer had disappeared inside the building, Dirk Kendall turned to the woman beside him. Glory stepped close to Kendall, looking up at him, her blue eyes dark and expressive. "You'll be back, Dirk?"

He gave a single affirmative nod. He seemed afraid to speak.

She took a half-step forward and raised her hands to his shoulders. Her voice vibrated with emotion as she murmured, "God bless you—for the truest friend a woman ever—"

"Don't, Glory. I can't—" he said hoarsely.

The words didn't matter; she knew what was in his mind. The hands on his shoulders crept a little higher, and the next instant his arms were around her. Choked curses came from one of the gagged prisoners. Neither of the two heard them.

Her face buried against his chest, Glory Carver murmured, "I've never forgotten, Dirk—those days—when we were young together. Be careful—and come back to me."

The reply came from the depths of her bright, high-piled hair. "Within a week—that's a promise."

He released her then. With a swift, golden look that told Dirk Kendall more than any words she could have uttered, she turned and walked swiftly toward the white building. He watched her until she disappeared. Then he stepped into the saddle, his long rifle lying across it in front of him.

"Let's get this over with," he snapped. "And any of you is welcome to try something. I don't need much more excuse to get rid of you permanently."

ABOUT NOON, four days later, in a wild valley of the Sangre de Cristos, Dirk Kendall halted the little cavalcade he led.

Without dismounting, he unlashed the bundle fastened behind the cantle, then rode over to a lone spruce branched thickly to the ground. He turned to look back at his prisoners.

"I wouldn't leave even my worst enemy permanently disarmed in this section of the country," he said dryly. "Your guns and belts are in this. You'd better look around and be sure you know how to get back here," and he thrust the bundle into the thick branches, lodging it in a crotch against the trunk of the tree.

At midafternoon he halted again, this time in a small valley with steep, wooded sides, with a stream running down its center and floored with thick grass.

"You'd better keep this spot in mind, too," he said, and without any explanation started northward once more.

Five miles further he halted for the third time. Here he cut the thongs fastening his prisoners' ankles, and told them to dismount. When they had obeyed he got into the saddle again.

He said, "Pueblo lies almost straight north. Fort William Bent lies to the northeast. The Santa Fe Trail is approximately two hours' hard riding to the east, and we're about opposite the Raton Pass."

"You're going to leave us afoot, with our hands tied and our weapons twenty miles from here? Kendall, if I ever get out of this—" Gaul Beauchamp began, when the frontiersman's cold voice broke in.

"The mules will be in that little valley I told you to remember. A five-mile walk 'll be letting you off easy. I'd advise you to travel east, hit the Trace, then turn north toward Fort Bent."

Beauchamp's reply was a short bark of a laugh. Dirk Kendall's voice lifted a little and was honed to thinness. "If you —any of you—show up in Santa Fe again you'll never leave it."

He swung his mule close to Jared Sifter and leaned forward. A quick slash of the knife and one of the strands fastening his wrists together was severed. Then, without speaking or looking back, he kicked his mule to a shuffling trot and, with the other animals on tether behind, headed back the way they had come.

THAT EVENING, an hour before sunset, Dirk halted in a small, concealed pocket of a steep-walled valley and built a tiny, smokeless fire over which he brewed coffee and heated strips of jerked venison. His meal finished, he lingered to examine one of the two Army Colts taken from the dead men in the parlor of the *Cabeza de Cibola.*

He withdrew the charges and tried the action, cocking the piece and pressing the trigger while he aimed at a yellow disc where he had lopped off a dead branch from an aspen for firewood. The muzzle wavered a little before the hammer fell and he shook his head in dissatisfaction. He tried again, and again the stiffness of the trigger action pulled the sights off the target.

He held the trigger back against the guard, cocked the hammer, and let it slip from under his thumb. A slight gleam of satisfaction shone in his eyes. He tried the same method three more times and was smiling faintly when he had finished. Then he reloaded the cylinders and stood up. He held the gun at waist height.

"Good balance—just like pointing your finger," he murmured.

He then flipped the hammer five times in quick succession, while the gun jumped with five hammering explosions. Walking to the tree, he discovered that the yellow disc had been expanded by the impact of lead around its edges. Each of the five shots had touched the bull's-eye, one of them centering it. There were no scores outside of it. Kendall cleaned and reloaded the gun.

Fastening his small pack behind the cantle and picking up his long rifle, he remounted and headed southward once more. Not until dusk had fallen and he was five miles from the spot where he had built the fire did he ride the mule into the shelter of a clump of aspens, stake it out, and with the saddle for a pillow, lie down for the night.

The next day he traveled leisurely. His mule was worn out from the many long and uninterrupted days of travel, but none of the four he had left could trail him if he tried. Toward evening of the day after that he halted at a concealed spring to prepare his supper. The next noon, he calculated, should see him close to Santa Fe. He had just finished and was about to put out the fire when movement at the edge of the pocket hiding the spring switched his attention to his mule.

The mule was standing with long ears erect, head stretched forward, motionless while it gazed southward. Dirk Kendall snatched up the long rifle and went at a crouching run for the mouth of the pocket. It was this keener sense perception of the mule that had made it preferable for Dirk Kendall to the horse. More than once his mule had given warning of the stealthy and silent approach to his lonely camp fire of scalp-hunting Indians long before any horse could possibly have detected them.

Kendall crouched for long moments looking southward down the valley in the direction his mule had indicated. He saw nothing. At length a faint haze rose and disappeared in the air and Dirk remembered the dry, shallow wash down there. That haze had been dust.

An instant later two dots appeared and within a minute his keen eyes detected two horses, one of them without a rider, coming fast. Soon he learned that the rider was an Indian, next that the unmounted horse bore a saddle. Both animals looked like long-legged, deep-chested thoroughbreds rather than tough little Indian ponies. Suddenly he recognized Black Eagle. He swung to the back of his mule and rode into the open, fast.

Almost immediately the native youth saw him and changed direction. The Indian's mount was exhausted, though the

lead horse appeared to be in fair shape. Leaning forward, his sharp eyes probing, yet betraying none of the anxiety that gripped him, Kendall asked, "What's happened, Black Eagle?"

"The White Lady—and the wolf with the little spot of hair on his lower lip. The wolf and his men came just before light this morning. They come on horses. They rode the horses to death. They have the White Lady. I get away. I ride hard. Almost kill my horse, but bring you good one."

He slipped from his mount's back. The animal was through. It stood with sides heaving, head lowered, legs spread wide. Dirk Kendall slipped from his mule and leaped for the other horse. As he sprang into the saddle without touching the stirrups, he barked. "Back in that pocket with the spring—food for you, Black Eagle."

The frontiersman and his mount became a streak racing south.

IV

AFTER LEAVING Dirk Kendall, Glory Carver mounted the rear stairs slowly. The faro dealer and young Black Eagle passed her, bearing the body of the renegade Texan. It, and the body of Jud Sifter, would be added to the private boot hill at the back of the grove, which Silver Carver had started after he had built the casino. She scarcely gave the two a glance, and at the top of the stairs turned into her own little room.

This room was the reflection of her hidden personality, of her inner longings. It was her refuge, as different from the glittering, garish rooms below as her own simple girlhood was unlike the false life she was now living. So simply furnished as to be almost plain, it was comfortable without being luxurious. Here Glory Carver was shut away from the life and surroundings her strange fate had forced her to adopt.

In the mirror of her dressing table she examined herself for a long moment more critically than she had done in years, and, without conceit, had to admit that the years had been kind to her; she had matured perceptibly while aging imperceptibly. Finally, with a few deft touches of rouge and powder, she repaired the damage the past wild hour had inflicted, and left the room.

She paused in the foyer and looked slowly around. Couples gyrated to a waltz in the dance hall, while in the theater the parties at the tables were drinking and waiting out the intermission between the vaudeville acts. Nowhere did she notice any unusual excitement. News of the drama above had apparently not reached the patrons of the casino. Seated alone at a table near the rear, with a half-emptied bottle of wine before him, was Alexander Breton.

Glory walked over to the table. Breton arose and bowed, smiling.

"Won't you be seated, Miss Carver? I was hoping you would join me and give me information on the strange request you made earlier this evening. Why did Dirk want his mules so suddenly—and the provisions? Surely he hasn't left without finishing his trading and learning the amount of additional credit with us for the fine collection of peltry he brought in?

"Then, too, I noticed your look-outs followed one of the men who joined our wagon train and came west when he went upstairs with two tough looking plainsmen. I hope nothing is wrong, that you're not in any serious trouble."

Glory smiled a little thinly as she accepted the chair Breton placed for her. She didn't reply for a moment, but seemed to be studying the old trader. Finally she spoke thoughtfully, as if soliloquizing aloud.

"I trust few men fully, but you've been a friend of mine for so long I am sure you are one I can trust. I find I need all the friends I can rely on. As for trouble—that seems to be an essential part of the unnatural life I lead."

She paused. Alexander Breton was listening without betraying, to any who might be watching, the sympathy he felt for this beautiful woman. Calmly, with little change of expression to reveal her feelings, she told the trader all that had happened.

"I hope this will finish this particular episode, but I have no faith that it will," she concluded. "Gaul Beauchamp is not the man to take a licking without trying again. Whatever he is, he is no coward. And he isn't used to being defeated. No

—I can only wait for Gaul's next move."

She paused and took a sip of wine, set the glass on the table, and slowly clenched her hand, while her voice carried a trace of the emotion she was fighting to conceal.

"I'm quitting this life. But I'm not quitting under pressure. Only when this game Gaul Beauchamp has started is completely finished will I get out."

"What will you do, Miss Carver?" Breton asked quietly.

She shook her head. "I don't know. I may go back east, to the peace and seclusion I've wanted for so many years."

Breton shook his head, smiling gently. "You'll never be happy in seclusion, and you're too beautiful to be allowed to live in peace. But things may work out. I may be able to help."

He checked himself and a faint frown shadowed his face as he looked over her shoulder toward the dance hall. "Here comes Ashville. He's been drinking," the old trader murmured.

GLORY heard the footsteps and felt the presence of the young man before she looked slowly around. Ashville Clayborn's face was flushed a little, and a faint hint of sneering laughter was in his eyes as he drew out a chair and seated himself without invitation. "Evenin', Miss Glory. Did you finally get rid of that greasy squaw-man?"

"Ashville!"

The sharp command that came from Alexander Breton caused his nephew to swing around and face him while, at the same time, it checked the reply Glory was about to make. There was nothing mild or gentle in the trader's stern face and cold eyes now. Resentment rose in the pale eyes of the youth, and Breton shot at that resentment with his low, intense voice.

"Dirk Kendall is no squaw-man, and you know it. And tonight he did something *you'll* never be able to do so long as you live. That slick hard-case you got so familiar with on the way here from Independence, Gaul Beauchamp, and some of his tough, gun-packing outlaws, tried to take this casino from Miss Carver not an hour ago. Dirk Kendall killed two of them and is taking the remaining four as captives far from here before releasing them. He should leave them in the heart of the wild where they can never get out, but it's just like that frontiersman to travel along the Trace and order them to keep going on to Fort Bent, and to join the first train heading back east. Don't ever let me hear you cast another slurring remark about Dirk Kendall, young man. He's a man, and a friend of *mine*." Alexander Breton stopped, and leaned back in his chair, a little white faced.

"Ashville."

The single word was calmly spoken, yet with a suggestive thinness of voice that made the perturbed youth turn to face Glory Carver. She continued quietly, but with sufficient emphasis to bring out the full sting in her words.

"Your uncle has said that Dirk Kendall is a man. He is. He was a man when you were in skirts—he'll be a man more years than you—if you live to be a hundred."

Ashville Clayborn forced his own gaze away from the darkened blue of Glory Carver's eyes. The flush started somewhere below his collar and crept up past his ears while he stared hard at the table top.

Finally, gulping twice, he managed to blurt, "I'm—I'm sorry," and then before either of the others could speak he flung away from the table and almost ran to the bar. He gulped a drink, a second, then headed back for the dance hall.

Breton shook his head slowly and sadly. "I'm afraid I made a mistake in bringing him west."

Glory said, "This country will either make or break him. He'll be a better man before he leaves it—or a dead one."

Young Clayborn went to the bar in the dance hall, ordered another drink, and carried it to one of the booths along the wall. The dark-haired percentage girl, Lottie, with whom he had danced earlier that evening, came over and slid onto the bench opposite him. Clayborn was staring at the filled glass before him.

"Get out," he said without looking up.

"Honey, what's the matter? I——" she began.

"*Get out.*" This time it was almost a yell. The girl flounced away, sending back a snarled oath. Clayborn didn't seem to hear.

His whole mind was taken up with the rebuke of Glory Carver in defense of a man who had put him in a burning hell of

jealousy and hate. He swallowed the drink in a single gulp. His emotions ran their course, finally, and he began to think, to remember the words of his uncle. Suddenly his eyes lighted and a crooked grin widened his lips. He left the casino, sauntering out carelessly. But, hidden by the grove of spruce, he began to run.

In the town he went to three of the lower dives before he discovered the man he wanted. This man, a gun-hung rawhide with slits for eyes and a knife scar that ran from his temple to the angle of his jaw, was just raising a glass of colorless liquid fire to his lips.

"Quick! News about Gaul," the flushed youth whispered, grasping the man's arm.

At a deserted table in the corner of the sordid little cantina Clayborn leaned forward and talked low and swiftly. When he had finished the man lunged out the door and Clayborn ordered a drink of the *tequila* the scar-faced man had been sampling.

GLORY CARVER, in her little office behind the stage, closed her account book after totalling the night's winnings. It had been a good night, but she scarcely thought of that. She knelt in front of the little safe beside her desk and spun the dial. It was nearly morning and out in the gaming room the croupier was putting the cover over the roulette wheel. The faro dealer was drawing the last cards from the case for the few gamblers remaining at his table.

Swinging the door of the safe open, Glory lifted out three heavy sacks of gold coins and set them on the desk. Then from beneath it she took a heavy leather grip. For a moment she stared at the gold and at the grip, while her thoughts wandered.

For the past four days a growing uneasiness had been gnawing at her. She felt impending tragedy, a disquiet that no amount of rationalization could conquer. Dirk Kendall had said he would return within a week. That would mean he would be back tomorrow night, at the latest—thirty-six more hours. She wished those hours were past, for she knew intuitively that with his arrival the depression would disappear. The weight of dread had induced her to arrange to store all of her cash on hand, except what was necessary to keep the games running, with Alexander Breton, and for him to take it back for deposit in a St. Louis bank. There would be a man over to get it within a half-hour.

She opened the grip and placed one of the bags in it, then stiffened as she heard running footsteps pause at the door. A quick knock and without waiting for an answer, the knocker swung the door open. The Apache youth, Black Eagle, hurried in.

"Miss Carver," he whispered tensely. "The wolves. They have come back. They come on horses, which they ride to death. I see the horses go down and the wolves come running. You mus' get out—fas'—you come with me. I hide you—"

From the doorway a sardonic voice said, "I'm afraid it's a little too late for that."

Gaul Beauchamp, his fine clothes travel-stained, his face grimy and drawn with fatigue, was standing in the doorway, and in his eyes was the glittering flare of triumph. From out in the gambling room came a sudden yell, a shot, and the sound of someone falling.

"That would be Jared Sifter killing your faro dealer. Jared always did hate him, and he tied us up, you may remember. Ah—no, you don't."

But the effort to stop the slippery Indian was useless. Black Eagle had bent double and whirled around. Beauchamp's gun was in his hand and he fired hastily. The shot missed. Then the youth was through the door and out of sight. Beauchamp stepped outside, raising the gun for a more careful shot. Before it could go off Glory Carver gripped his arm and pulled down. The lead plowed into the floor.

Beauchamp endeavored to throw her off, but she clung frantically. He thrust her back into the office, then chopped savagely with his fist, hitting her in the face. She sank to the floor and Beauchamp stepped back into the theater. There was no target now. Black Eagle had disappeared. Beauchamp glanced around and saw the remaining gamblers hurriedly leaving the casino. His men were rounding up the employes of the *Cabeza de Cibola*. He reentered the office and shut the door. Glory was thrusting herself to her feet.

The gambler leaned against the closed door, looking at her with lack-luster eyes.

Glory's own eyes were dark with rage and defiance and there was a discolored spot on her jaw that was beginning to swell. Beauchamp's glance shifted to the sacks of gold on the desk, then back to the woman.

"You were just about to move your money, eh, my dear? Sorry it's too late now. You had your chance when I made my offer to let you keep what you had made here. You refused, and the chance is gone. You were also given the opportunity to marry me. You refused that also, and that chance, too, is gone.

"Nor would it be wise to waste your time waiting for your hero. He'll be here, but you won't. And there will be men waiting who'll be glad to meet him. You will be on a little trip with me. Oh, hold your temper, my lady. I'm through coddling you. This trip we're taking will be for training—your training. When we come back you will be thoroughly broken. Make up your mind to that."

Glory stood with her back to the desk, in her fury as beautiful as a tawny puma defending her cubs. When she spoke her low, slightly husky voice came out with the hiss of a spitting panther. "You egotistical, self-centered fool—do you think you can get away with this? The only place I'd go with you would—"

"Shut up!"

"—be to hell—and I'll show you the way, Gaul Beauchamp, I wouldn't be in your shoes now for all the money the *Cabeza* has ever made. When Dirk Kendall takes your trail—"

"I told you once," Beauchamp said in his colorless voice, and moved with explosive suddenness.

Then he went to the door and called. Jed and Jared Sifter came. He indicated the unconscious woman lying on the floor, with a trickle of blood seeping from the corner of her mouth.

"Tie her up and gag her. Take her to one of the rooms upstairs and lock her in while we turn in for a few hours. Have a pair of fresh horses and a pack horse loaded with food and equipment for two weeks brought here late in the afternoon. You two will be in charge till we get back. Run things just as they have been. We'll rig the wheel later—and the other lay-outs. And to any questions just say that Miss Carver has gone on a short trip. Keep men out to watch for that trapper."

The two nodded. Jared said, "We'll take care of everything, Chief. Particularly that last."

V

A HALF-HOUR before dark the gallant animal Dirk Kendall rode was blowing foam mixed with blood. A half-hour later its stride was breaking badly. Kendall reined to a stop and swung down. There was still some fifteen miles to travel. He hesitated a second, balancing in his hand the long rifle. Then he returned it to its saddle boot, looped the reins over the saddle horn, and left the horse. He broke inlto a long-legged stride that was half a run and far faster than it appeared.

An hour passed without pause for rest. Along valley and wooded ridge, over hogback and high bench, the frontiersman kept up his tireless gait, slowing only on the steeper slopes and regaining lost time on long descents.

A full moon topped the eastern horizon and shed its white light over the land. Kendall had left the trail and taken a shorter course over high, rough ground that would have slowed a horse or mule to a walk. He topped a high mountain shoulder and halted suddenly, staring down into the valley ahead. A flicker of reddish light had caught his quick eye. He stared steadily at the spot, but the light did not reappear.

He continued to watch, and thought he saw movement down there. A moment later he was sure of it. Something was heading westward up the narrowing valley. He waited, his distance-trained gaze centering on a bright, moonlit glade up the valley. A horse and rider crossed it, and the gait of the animal betrayed exhaustion. Dirk Kendall left the shoulder, heading toward the spot where he had seen the reddish fire.

He approached cautiously, easing through a stand of spruce that afforded cover for a portion of the way, then slinking forward with only brush for cover. At length, after a careful examination of the spot, he stepped into the open. Immediately he saw a faint glow, a single coal in a bed of ashes. Several blackened wood-ends indicated

where a last flare-up of the dying fire had caught his attention. He began to circle the spot slowly, studying the spot and reverting to the habit of a man who lives long months in solitude, that of reading aloud the record of what he deciphered.

"First there were two men, three horses. Cooked coffee—left a half hour ago. Three horses, means one was a pack animal. One man wore flat-heeled boots, the other—" and here he paused where he was trying to read the tracks in the narrow belt of gravel at the edge of a spring.

He was staring at a tiny track not unlike that of a partially smudged deer track, and he was realizing that this second was not like that of a man's boot, but was a small, woman's heel mark. But there were two sets of men's tracks—he was sure of that. The imprints of the two pairs of flat-heeled boots were entirely dissimilar. He recalled the rider he had seen and began to recapitulate and to correct his previous reading.

"Two riders, one a woman, ate here. Later a third rider, a man, came along, trailing them. All came from the same direction and left here heading the same way."

The slowly shifting light and shadow around the site revealed the edge of something white beneath a low bush. Kendall went there and picked it up. Even as he lifted the small square of linen his sensitive nostrils caught a faint and familiar scent that brought a savage oath to his lips. He tucked the handkerchief into his shirt pocket, and straightened. He thought swiftly.

It would be impossible, even in the bright moonlight, to do any fast trailing. But, on the other hand, this valley ended in a steep, straight-walled gorge without any branch openings. The floor of the canyon gradually climbed until its walls merged with the slope of an ancient volcano. The truncated cone formed a deep, wide crater in the center of which was a small lake of pure water, Spirit Lake, shunned by natives of all tribes as the site of one of the tragedies of their religious legends. On the shore of this crater lake an early prospector had built a log cabin from the black cottonwoods growing on the sloping walls. What better place to hide a captive, to subdue a captive to the will of the captor? Dirk Kendall broke into a run—he wouldn't have to trail by sight.

A third of the way up the steep pitch of the canyon he discovered an exhausted horse. It was lying on its side, but it was alive. Kendall examined it briefly, and was puzzled.

It had neither bridle nor saddle, but had been ridden bare back and with only a halter. That meant it had been taken in a hurry. The marks on its hide showed indications that it was a driving horse, used to a full harness. It was a gray and there was something familiar about that fact. Then he remembered the pair of grays that had been attended by Alexander Breton's negro outside the *Cabeza de Cibola* and that had brought the trader and Gaul Beauchamp to the casino. Also, it looked like the horse he had seen leave the spring while he was on the mountain shoulder.

Kendall continued up the canyon toward the crest of the cone towering far above him. Mountain man and used to the heights, tough and inured to hardship though he was, he was sucking in the thin air with great gulps and his body was oozing perspiration when he reached the crest and caught a glimpse of silver moonlight on still water far below.

He wiped the sweat out of his eyes and began the descent, keeping to the thickest of the timber. He was circling toward the cabin when he heard a hoarse and nervously high-pitched voice raised in challenge.

"Gaul Beauchamp—come out here."

A BRIEF night breeze cooled the frontiersman's face and he moved forward more swiftly, confident that the horses in the clearing just ahead would not detect him and give warning. A gleam of yellow light showed between the trees; a kerosene lantern within the cabin, its rays diffused and softened by the deer-bladder window pane. Then an oblong of brighter light appeared, following the sound of a door being flung open. Kendall moved in swiftly, his moccasin-encased feet making no sound on the sod. He halted at the edge of the glade, staring at the tableau before him.

A dishevelled man, his blond hair an unruly mop, his face gleaming with sweat,

his expensive clothing stained and torn by cat-claw and cactus, and his eyes wide and wild, stood on spread legs, a revolver in his trembling hand. Fatigue, rage, and fear fought for control of his nerves, but despite the storm that shook him a sort of desperate courage made his stand magnificent, and for a moment appeared to stun the man in the doorway who had appeared to accept the challenge.

"Beauchamp, you dog, get your gun out. I'm going to kill you for the double-crossing hound you always were. I was blind, but I've got my eyes open now."

Despite the melodramatic speech, it was apparent that the wild man who croaked it was saying just what he felt, that he was not consciously indulging in bombast. The gambler, with a sound of the yelled words, slowly drew a derringer. His voice was as unruffled as the other's was agitated.

"Clayborn, I could say I'm sorry to do this, but I'm not. You've had it coming for a long time. You're a spoiled brat, an unwhipped young pup who's going to get what he's been asking for and—"

The final phrase was half drowned by a cry from inside the cabin, a high-pitched cry in a woman's choked voice. It had not died before the gun in young Ashville Clayborn's hand began to jump as he fired with desperate speed. The sounds of lead striking the walls on both sides of the calm gambler proved the youth's unfamiliarity with weapons. With the hollow click of the hammer that indicated the last charge had already been fired, the dishevelled youth howled a cry of defiance and hurled the gun itself. Even his throw missed Gaul Beauchamp by a foot.

The gambler, who had stood perfectly motionless during the desperate and useless attack, now calmly raised the derringer. But this was a new Ashville Clayborn. With another cry of defiance, the young man broke into a staggering charge, straight toward the yawning muzzle of the gun. For once the gambler was momentarily disconcerted by the unexpected action. He hesitated a second. That hesitation cost him his chance. Moonlight glinted on a streak of steel. Beauchamp was whirled back against the door and pinned there momentarily by a steel blade that lanced through the muscles of his shoulder and entered the rough plank. At the same instant the staggering Clayborn tripped over a stump and went down on his face.

Out of the grove of trees stalked a tall, wide-shouldered figure in smoke-colored buckskins. He walked silently, like an apparition, and the gambler's sharp eyes centered on him, widened a trifle, then narrowed. Dirk Kendall had a six-gun in his hand, but that hand was not raised.

With a pain-thinned curse, Gaul Beauchamp twisted his body violently and tore the knife loose from the door. With the blade still sticking in his shoulder, he brought up the derringer.

The frontiersman's gun muzzle tipped up and his hand flashed to waist level. The Colts hammered five, spaced explosions, and with the first discharge Gaul Beauchamp was slammed back against the wall of the cabin. He shook with each succeeding shot and his body sagged lower and lower, held to the wall by the impact of each succeeding shot as he went down.

A FEW MINUTES later two men faced each other across the little table in the center of the cabin. Seated on a bunk, gently massaging the marks left by the rawhide that had bound her wrists, Glory Carver watched them silently. A faint, enigmatic smile appeared in the frontiersman's eyes and on his lips. The flushed face of Ashville Clayborn was tipped down and his eyes were fastened on the table top. He spoke in a thick voice.

"Maybe you heard what that snake called me a little while ago. He was right, damn him. I've been a damned fool, a half-witted, undisciplined, blind ass. I did the rottenest, double-crossing—"

"I reckon you've said enough, Clayborn. We can guess the rest—you sent fresh, fast horses up the Trace for Beauchamp and the other three."

The youth nodded dumbly, but did not look up. The woman on the bed spoke then, her voice low and even and kind.

"I told your uncle, Ashville, that this country would either make or break you, that you'd be a better man before leaving it, or a dead one. I think you've shown us the answer."

The youth flushed a deeper red, but he looked up a little defiantly. "The country didn't break me—I broke myself. And I'm not dead yet."

DIRK GAZED off down the valley. "There is one thing more we have to do, Clayborn. We must see to it that *Cabeza de Cibola* is returned to its owner as soon as possible—"

"So that she can sell it," cut in Glory, grimly.

Dirk cocked an eyebrow at her.

"Yes," she said defiantly. "Mr. Breton knows of a good man looking for just such a place—the kind of a man, Mr. Breton says, who wants to buy a good reputation and keep it. And I—I can think of a much better way to invest my money."

"We have yet to get it back," interposed Ashville. "There are two Sifter brothers still holding it. And they have men. . . ."

Dirk let a muscle around his mouth twitch slightly. "They are expecting me, I think. But," he added softly, "I don't think they are expecting Gaul Beauchamp."

Glory and Clayborn stared at each other, astonished. Then light dawned in their eyes.

"No, of course not," said the girl. "At least, not like this."

"And who," grinned Clayborn, delightedly, "will give them their orders now?"

Dirk strode to a slender birch nearby. His knife glittered, and then he returned with a square of bark. With a rock-sliver he began scratching at the inner, darker, surface of the bark. Soon he stood up and stepped over to what had once been Gaul Beauchamp.

He slung the body over his shoulder and stalked over to one of the horses. He flung it across the saddle and then forced the rolled-up birch-bark note into one clenched dead hand. Then he swung up on the other.

"Glory, you must rest here. I leave you in good hands—"

"I say," burst out Clayborn, "I'm going with *you!*"

"How?" queried the trapper, ironically. "I'm taking the horses. Besides, someone must stay with Miss Carver."

And with a wave of his hand he urged the horses forward. Without looking back he rode down out of the clearing and set off at a steady walk toward the *Cabeza de Cibola.*

The moon had set when he rode into a grove of trees some distance from the building. He swung down. Moving with the utmost silence, he led the other horse to the very edge of the grove and gave it a gentle slap in the rump.

Then he melted into the shadows and watched. The animal plodded off through the darkness—toward the lighted windows.

Harsh, raddled laughter came from those windows, mingled with the faint clinking of bottles. Then a voice called out and the hilarity dwindled slightly. Other voices rose. The laughter changed to snarls that rose to a fear-pitch.

Suddenly there came to Dirk Kendall's waiting ears the distant thudding of a fleeing horse. Then the sound of two more horses. There was a hoarse shout, followed by the crack of a gun.

And then gunfire broke out in earnest, bellowing from inside the distant house. Abruptly, it was quiet. The windows shone as brightly as before. But no sound came from them.

The mountain man arose and went forward. He came to the building and cautiously edged his eyes above the sill of one of the lighted windows. There was no change in the gravity of his eyes as he surveyed the bodies there.

GLORY CARVER could restrain her impatience no longer. She and Dirk were riding back to her house in the bright sunshine. Clayborn and Black Eagle were following.

Ever since he had returned, Dirk Kendall had given her only the meagerest of explanations. "I don't suppose," she said bitterly, "you'll ever tell me what you wrote on that piece of bark."

"Why, certainly." He turned surprised eyes on her. "All I said was *'I follow—with friends.'*"

She smiled. "I see. They thought you were bringing an army." He nodded. "It scattered them like pigeons." He chuckled. "Now you answer my question."

"I haven't heard it yet," she said primly.

"Last night you said you were going to sell *Cabeza de Cibola.* You said you could think of a better way of investing your money. May I ask what that is?"

She shot him a glance then—her eyes dancing. "I'm thinking of going into the fur trade."

The glance he shot her had flickering fires. But all he said was: "Is that so?"

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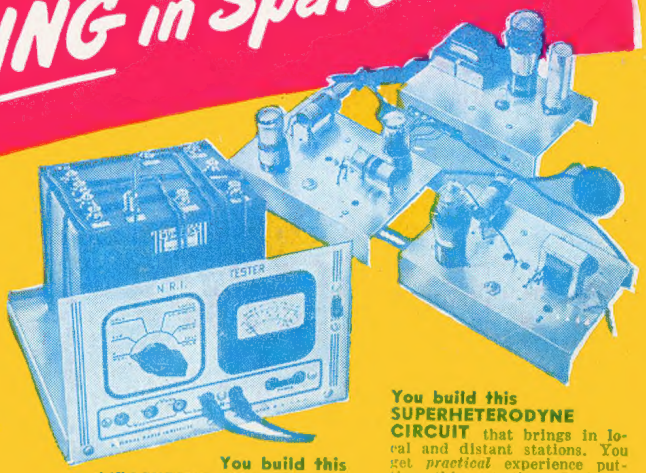

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